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Pokémon Go Mania

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

As someone who was there for Pac-Man Fever, covered video games for close to 25 years, and played games since before there were "consoles," I can say with certainty that Pokémon Go is the biggest phenomenon I have ever witnessed. Partly, I believe, because it is so visible. While the Minecraft revolution happened in the homes around the globe, Pokémon Go is playing out before us in public like a Shakespearian drama.

News stories of people falling off cliffs, being trapped in caves, or running and screaming across a public park in pursuit of these creatures just adds to the spectacle. Businesses giving discounts for members of Team Valor, or free drinks to champions of gyms, has given it a social resonance that games rarely achieve.

I could easily argue that the game itself isn't all that great (specifically the servers). But the perfect storm of smartphones ready to support augmented reality (AR), and an audience hungry to experience something new with a brand they have loved for years, has struck a chord with pop culture we may never see again.

It will be interesting to see where AR goes from here. While I have always felt it's an amazing utility that could change how we interact with the world, it will be fascinating to see how the games evolve, because after the success of Pokémon Go we can expect a deluge of similar products trying to cash in on the magic.

Enjoy the magic as gaming continues to evolve with AR and VR, but also take a moment to appreciate how gaming becomes more and more mainstream. Pokémon Go has ignited the imaginations of people, not just gamers, everywhere. Read more about the "Pokénomenon" on page 14, and enjoy the issue.

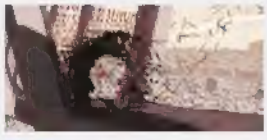
Cheers,

38 Destiny: Rise Of Iron

Two years into its life, Destiny continues to draw in a diverse group of players, each looking to find their own way to play. The newest expansion embraces those divergent expectations, with a focus on new paths to customize play and progress how you want. Learn about Rise of Iron, and where Destiny is headed after the expansion's release, on p. 38. ***by Matt Miller***

20 Turbulent Times In Windy City
Culture Shock Games' We Are Chicago touches on the social unrest the city is currently experiencing. We spoke with the studio about how it is exploring such a difficult topic.

22 All Ages: How To Introduce Your Toddler To Gaming
Early educational gaming is rare in the mainstream, but we have some suggestions.



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This month we're looking at the abstract Bound and the visually-striking Far.

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Pokémon Go from The Pokémon Company and Niantic has been a huge hit. Everyone's playing it, and we talked with its creators all about the game.

24 Interacting With Interlude
How does a relatively obscure gaming company sign on names like BioShock's Ken Levine and Her Story's Sam Barlow?

36 Opinion: New Hardware Questions Outweigh The Answers
Iterative consoles appear to be the future, but we still have a lot of questions.

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In honor of our cover story, we take a look at the best merch inspired by Bungie's popular shooter.

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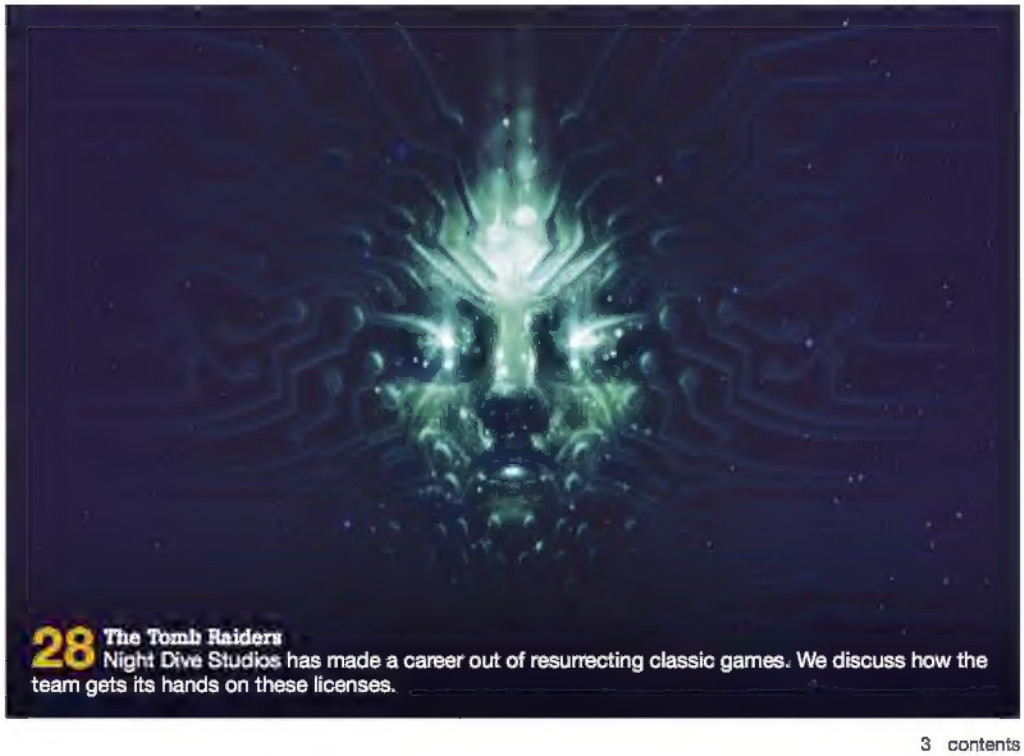

28 The Tomb Raiders
Night Dive Studios has made a career out of resurrecting classic games. We discuss how the team gets its hands on these licenses.

54 Battlefield 1
Spending dozens of hours in the Battlefield 1 closed alpha gave us a good idea of what to expect from DICE's latest shooter.

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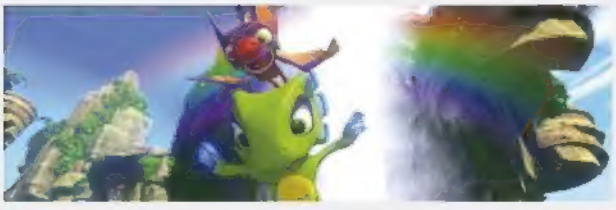
We go hands-on with Keiji Inafune's upcoming Microsoft exclusive.

58 Halo Wars 2
Halo's RTS is getting a sequel, and we spent time in the beta.



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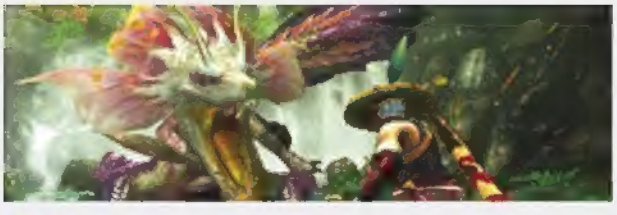
The creators of Banjo-Kazooie are back with a new dual-protagonist platformer.

65 Sea Of Thieves
We played Rare's online cooperative pirate simulator.

66 Absolver
Developer Sloclap is taking a novel (and pretty) approach to online fighting.

80 I Am Setsuna
Does Square Enix's throwback RPG hit the same notes as games like Chrono Trigger?

94 Classic: The Nintendo Games That Nintendo Didn't Make
We tracked down the man behind the obscure Zelda and Mario games that released on the Philips CD-i to find out how Nintendo games legally existed on a competing console.



89 Monster Hunter Generations
Monster Hunter Generations doesn't fundamentally change the game, but it's great for veterans and newcomers alike.

88 Rhythm Heaven Megamix
Nintendo's bizarre music and rhythm game is the best it has ever been.

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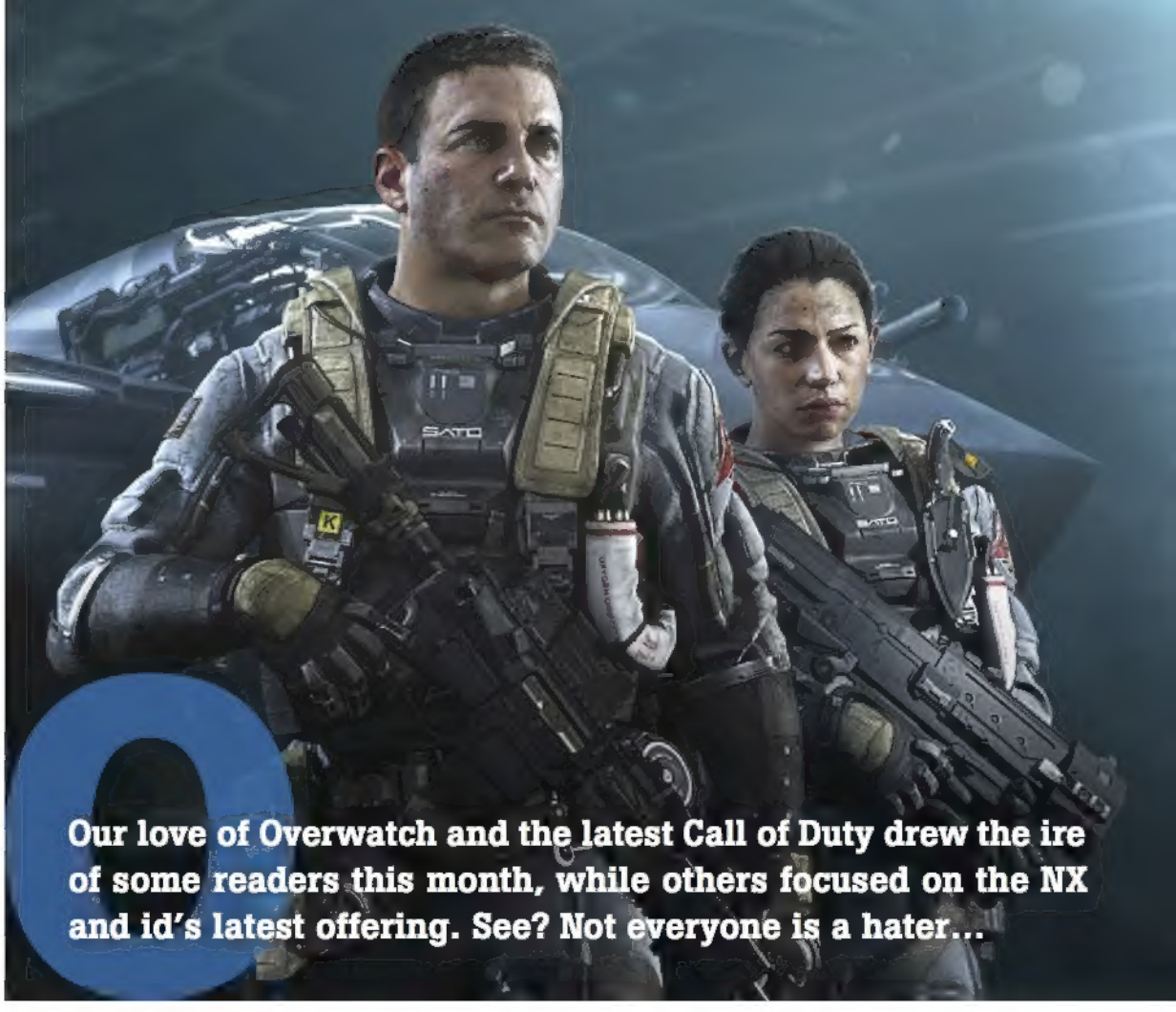
feedback



Our love of Overwatch and the latest Call of Duty drew the ire of some readers this month, while others focused on the NX and id's latest offering. See? Not everyone is a hater...

Infinite Woe-fare

I darn near threw issue 279 away when I saw Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare on the cover. That was a missed opportunity to put something people actually care about on the cover, not to mention the 12 pages wasted on the article. There is a large audience of people who lost interest for the series a long time ago, and an even larger audience who completely disliked the announcement. Is Infinity Ward that desperate to get sales they had to get their game on your cover?

Matthew Snell
Vancouver, WA

I was very disappointed with the warm reception Infinite Warfare received in your cover story. Barely even touching on the very intense backlash from fans of the franchise seems very biased and quite frankly sellout-ish. Instead of focusing on the backgrounds of characters and the setting of the game, I'm sure many others like myself would have rather read about the precautions Infinity Ward is taking when it comes to releasing what many are predicting will be the worst-selling Call of Duty game since Black Ops Declassified.

Jacob Bair
via email

If there's one thing the response to our Infinite Warfare cover story proves, it's that some gamers can't stand not being considered the target audience for a game – especially Call of Duty. If you're looking for historically grounded military shooter, Battlefield 1 should definitely pique your interest, but don't mistake your disinterest in Infinite Warfare as a portent of doom for the series. For every "fan" that incessantly declares how much they hate Call of Duty on the web, there are millions who happily buy and play each installment without a deluge of complaints. They're the ones Activision is catering to, not necessarily you.

Holding Onto Hardware

Nintendo is and will always be the video game company I grew up on. I would love to share my memories and experiences with my children without having to download mediocre emulators or house multiple consoles under my TV to do so. That is why I wish Nintendo would leave the hardware business and move to a model similar to Sega, developing software for PlayStation/Xbox systems. Imagine playing New Super Mario Brothers 3 on a PS4, which could easily handle anything Nintendo could render and has a proven and reliable network. Or buying a best-of-Nintendo compilation with all of our favorites from the NES/SNES/N64 on it! I know I may never see that glorious day, but a grown man can still dream, right?

Jeremy Halkin
via email

Plenty of gamers have pondered what a post-hardware Nintendo might look like, and whether focusing solely on software would allow the company to create even better games and release them more frequently. If we're using Sega as a blueprint, then the answer to both questions is not necessarily. However, the examples you list don't actually require Nintendo to leave the hardware business: The NX could be a powerful console with a user-friendly network, and Nintendo could release a best-of compilation for its own system. That said, Pokémon Go's surprising success might be raising eyebrows at Nintendo – read more about it on pg. 38.

Contact Us
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The Million Dollar Question

This year's E3 was fantastic, but I have a lot of questions about the wave of new consoles in development. Have the Xbox One and PS4 reached their technological limits, or are Microsoft and Sony just betting on the success of VR with their new Scorpio and Neo systems? Did I waste a lot of money on the Wii U and my large collection of Amiibos, or will the NX reward me for my investment by adding backward compatibility? These are just a few of the many questions I'm left with due to the lack of info that's out there! We were spoiled by the last-gen consoles lasting almost a decade. I know that was a rare occasion, but the thought of buying yet another round of consoles so soon has me a little worried.

Anthony Jacobs
via email

Your confusion and worry are well warranted, Anthony. All three companies have not shared much information about their upcoming systems, and what little information there is has been vague and sometimes contradictory. How Sony and Microsoft's upgraded systems will complement or compete with the current PS4 and Xbox One is a question that millions of current-gen system owners have right now. As soon as there are concrete answers, we'll let you know.

Overwoof

I can't believe you gave Overwatch a 10! A game with little appeal, a game designed for 12-year-olds. The cartoon COD. A 10! When I saw that, my first thought was, "Yep, Game Informer is in the pockets of Activision/Blizzard." How much were you guys paid to look the other way and stamp a 10 on this turd of a game?

Bob Bently
via email

To me, a 10 means everything from start to finish is perfect. Not one flaw anywhere; not a glitch, not a bug, not one out-of-place polygon or texture. Controls, audio, and video flawlessly execute in perfect harmony. I used to revere G.I. as a last bastion for pretty honest review scores, but a perfect score is a very, very far cry from what Overwatch deserves. While the game is amazing and extremely fun, it has obvious flaws – it only contains four maps [it's 12 maps, actually –Ed.], four game modes, no campaign, and shares obvious similarities to Valve's Team Fortress 2. The fact that an unfinished product received a perfect score makes me believe that the reviewer is in someone's pocket. I can no longer support this magazine that brought me much entertainment. The magazine as a whole seems tainted now. I wish that review was honest, but as of now I will be reading other outlets.

Noah Brandt
via email

Whether it's the insult-laden rant or the betrayed superfan routine, it's remarkable how review-score complaints always fall back on bribery as the only possible explanation for our "wrong" opinions. Simply put, Overwatch has already provided us with hundreds of hours of the best team-based competitive action of this generation. The fact that Blizzard continues to add more free content doesn't mean it's "unfinished" (which would disqualify it from being reviewed in the first place), and having your own notions of what a 10 constitutes doesn't supersede our decades-old review scale.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"How much did you get paid to put Call of Duty on the front cover?"

Nothing. How much did you get paid to whine about it?

"Am I the only one who understood issue 279's 'Reader Gibberish' is an obvious reference to the plot of Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards?"

If you say so.

"I would love to see more memes in the magazine so it would appeal to a younger audience."

We realize this isn't a question per se, but no, we're not doing that.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Hello Game Informer, I understand the Game of Thrones is currently on production for a new Science Fiction Movie in New York City."

Question Of The Month:

What's the nerdiest video game argument or conversation you've ever had?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Bungie's executive producer Scott Taylor and game director Chris Barrett give us a look at what's next for Destiny. Check out pg. 38 for the details. **(Right)** During our annual E3 booth tour, we ran into *Modern Family*'s Nolan Gould, who approved of Jeff Cork's old-man beard.

On Your Mind

- NX Hopes And Dreams
- E3 Aftermath
- Mid-Gen Console Consternation
- Review Rants
- COD Complainers

NX Necessities

In issue 279, we asked readers what the Nintendo NX needs to make it a must-buy console. The responses covered a wide range of requests, but unsurprisingly, games came out on top.

Nothing; I will buy the NX regardless, because I have been a longtime supporter of Nintendo. That said, I wouldn't mind an awesome lineup of games at the start of launch, like Mario Kart, Zelda, and a new Mario game.

Thailyone Lor

There is no single hardware feature that is going to get me to buy the NX; it is all about the software. And I don't mean slightly new versions of Mario and Zelda. If Nintendo cannot attract third-party partners, then the NX will sadly be the first Nintendo console that I don't buy.

Tim Malone

I would like for NX to have a robust online service. My old friends and I live several hours apart, and playing together is all done online. I understand that Nintendo likes people playing together locally, but a lot of us live a different reality. So please, Nintendo, make playing online with friends easy.

Dominic Böhme

The only thing I want is a controller without any gimmicks. I think a regular console would attract more hardcore gamers. Also, I don't think Nintendo realizes this, but people care about graphics. The NX needs to have graphics that can compete with the likes of the Xbox One and PS4.

Jackson Benjamin

Doomed And Loving It

I recently purchased Doom and have been in love with it since I first started playing. The campaign offers a lot of awesome, ass-kicking moments as well as secrets and collectibles. However, the feature that stole my heart was SnapMap. SnapMap wipes the floor with Halo 5's Forge mode – and I say that as a dedicated Halo fan. Not only is it available offline – a huge advantage over Halo, as I do not have Internet at the moment, but it offers puzzles, pre-installed featured maps, tutorials, and an altogether more intuitive interface. Plus, the brutal violence and heavy-metal soundtrack mixed with the cognitive challenges of level creation please my every fancy. Doom is everything I want in a video game.

Danny Blanton Jr.
via email

While some were turned off by Doom's uninspired multiplayer and the inherent limitations of SnapMap, you won't find many complaints about the single-player campaign. Id crafted a pitch-perfect translation of Doom's classic, breakneck gameplay, augmented by smart modern touches. It may not be the most talked-about shooter of the year, but it's still one of the best.

(Left) Our photo tour of E3 continues this month, with Brian Shea posing with The Coalition's Rod Fergusson. (Right) Meanwhile, Reiner caught up with Bethesda's Angela Ramsey, Erin Losi, and Tracey Thompson.

(continued on page 10)

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gallery

character in The Walking Dead. *Here's hoping she appears again in Telltale's Season 3*

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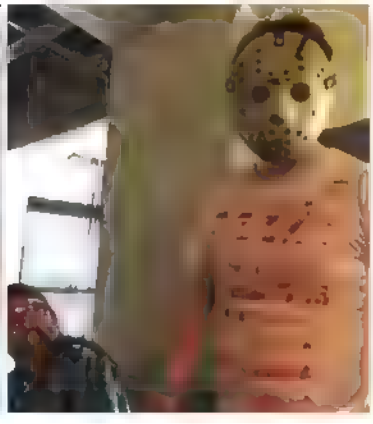

(Left) They may be dressed conspicuously alike, but we have no trouble telling apart Ubisoft's Eric Pope and Kalypso Media's Alex Ryan. No trouble at all. **(Right)** We were having fun checking out Friday The 13th with developer Gun Media until Ben went all Voorhees and ruined the demo

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Full Disclosure

Controversy erupts over the ethics of sponsored YouTube influencer videos

NOTABLES

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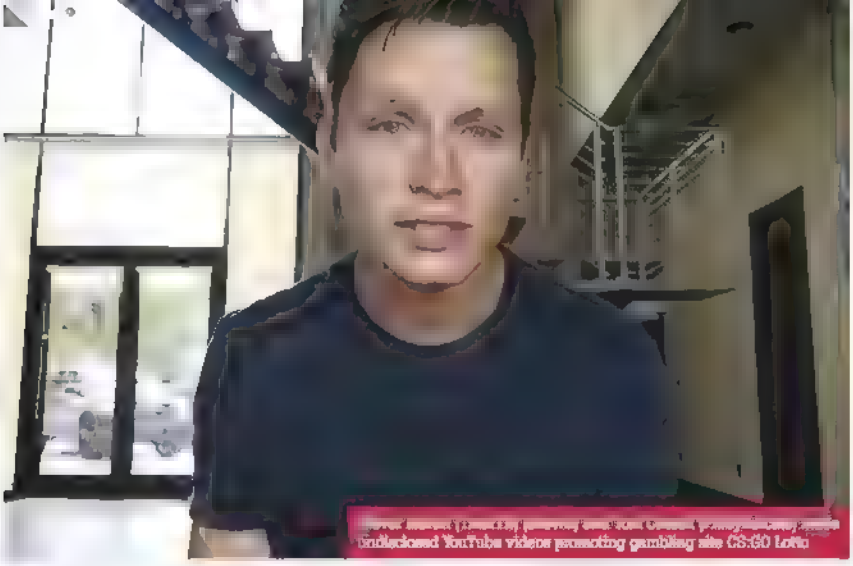
36 opinion new hardware questions outweigh the answers

Marketing is a constant presence in our lives, as companies relentlessly try to lure consumers to buy and engage with their products. This fundamental aspect of capitalism, however, has its checks and balances. One of these is the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a government agency designed to protect consumers against false advertising and fraud. The FTC impacts your daily life as a consumer in numerous ways, from barring companies from making false claims to protecting you from deceptive end-user license agreements. Recently, a pair of incidents that ran afoul of the FTC's disclosure guidelines reminded everyone to not always believe what you hear online.

Both cases involved video personalities, known as "influencers," vouching to their social-media audience about a particular product without adequately divulging that they were, in fact, being paid by the manufacturers to do so. This obscured the true relationship between the company and the YouTubers.



Undisclosed YouTube videos promoting gambling site CS:GO Lotto

In July, Warner Bros. settled charges by the FTC that the publisher paid online influencers for sponsored gameplay videos on YouTube for Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor. Influencers did not adequately disclose this fact "clearly and conspicuously in the video itself where consumers were likely to see or hear them," reads the FTC statement on the matter. The agency's complaint charges that Warner Bros. instructed influencers to disclose their relationship with the company so that it would appear "below the fold" of the video's description text by making sure it could only be seen if watchers clicked the "show more" button for the full drop-down box. The FTC also says that Warner Bros. required influencers to promote the game positively, and not mention any bugs or glitches.

Consequently, the FTC has issued an order requiring Warner Bros. to stop misrepresentation in any future videos, properly disclose any sponsored content, and educate its influencers about how to properly do so. This includes monitoring compliance and terminating payment for anyone who fails to adhere to these standards. The FTC says it still has to make the proposed consent order final (after which time violations could result in a civil penalty), which will happen after a 30-day public comment period through August 10.

This isn't the first time an instance like this occurred. In 2015, Machinima settled a complaint from the FTC for a similar situation in which the company took money from Microsoft for influencer videos aimed at promoting the Xbox One and some of its games without disclosing it was sponsored content.

A week before the Warner Bros. and FTC settlement, another non-disclosure incident occurred involving YouTubers and the popular online shooter Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS.GO), this time introducing the specter of gambling. Popular YouTubers Tom Cassell (ProSyndicate) and Trevor Martin (TmarTN) made numerous videos talking about how they made money from CS:GO gun and knife skins via a site they used called CS:GO Lotto.

The site lets users wager their skins earned in the game against others, with the winner of the pool (determined by a slot-machine-like random wheel) able to then sell the skins on a public marketplace separate from the game for real money. In effect, the skins are virtual poker chips.

YouTube channel HonorTheCall uncovered that Cassell (who previously ran undisclosed Machinima videos for Xbox One) and Martin actually own CS:GO Lotto. Thus, the videos of them spontaneously winning skins for money on YouTube could have been manipulated to stage big payouts and therefore make more dramatic and alluring videos to attract users. Evidence also suggests that Martin logged into his site as a bot and admin, enabling him to fix wagers in his favor.

After Cassell and Martin's ownership of the site was uncovered, Martin made a video saying that they never made a secret out of being the owners of CS:GO Lotto and that this was stated in the videos' description. The problem is, not only is this disclosure below the fold as in the FTC's case against Warner Bros., but there is Google cache evidence that this was added after the fact. Martin later said he only became an owner in Lotto after he made the videos, but incorporation documents show that Martin has been CS:GO Lotto's president since its inception. Despite Martin's declaration that he never denied being affiliated with CS:GO Lotto, in one video he describes Lotto as a new site he "found," not owned, and further gave the appearance that his use of the site was accidental by referring to Lotto with the third-person pronoun "they."

As of the time of this writing, the FTC has declined to comment when reached on this latest non-disclosure by Cassell and Martin, although Valve has started to distance itself from these CS:GO gambling sites by sending cease and desist notices to these sites, which link to players' Steam accounts to access their inventory and use Steam's in-game trading system although they aren't affiliated directly with Valve. Currently Valve, CS:GO Lotto, and other sites are facing a potential class action lawsuit pertaining to CS:GO skin gambling, including the fact that Valve gets a cut of money from all Steam Marketplace transactions (but not the gambling itself) and underage players can gamble using the game and these sites.

In addition to the general nefariousness of luring underage children to gambling sites under false pretenses, situations like this bring up another issue. When sponsored content is blended seamlessly with independent thought, it becomes hard to keep track of what opinions belong to the influencer and which are the product of financial payoff. The rise and popularity of influencers has created a new discussion about the ethics of disclosure for a space in which anyone can become a leading voice to the public without the mission statements or editorial guidelines of a traditional media outlet.

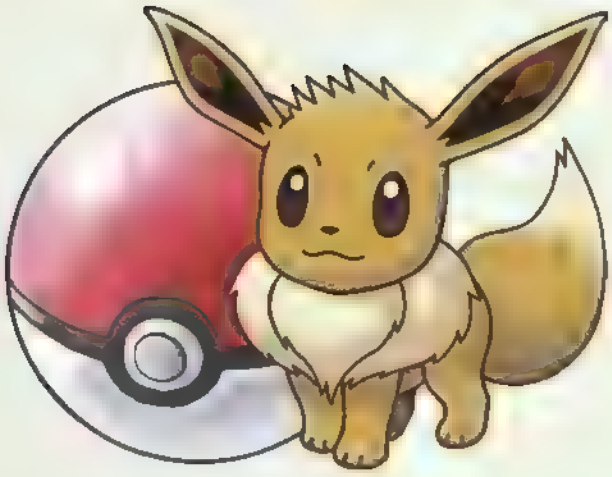
It may seem like common sense not to gamble your CS:GO skins even if someone in a video does, or to form your own opinion despite what a popular YouTuber says. However, even in the world of marketing, a veneer of trust must exist between companies and their consumers. The public – and particularly the younger audiences being targeted – have a right to some protections before they are pried away from their hard-earned money.

Warner Bros. paid influencers to promotively about Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor without disclosing that they were paid to do so

Pokénomenon

The augmented reality mobile game Pokémon Go has captivated the masses. We talked to developer Niantic about its genesis and the studio's plans for the future

by Kyle Hilliard



In recent weeks, nearly everyone you see looking at their phone in public is doing a familiar upward swipe motion on their screen to throw Pokéballs at Pokémon. People are walking through neighborhoods, organizing meet-ups, and socializing in a whole new way. The craze has reached a pervasiveness unseen in video games.

Local businesses are seeing a spike in foot traffic thanks to players exploring to catch Pokémon. Yelp, the popular website that crowd-sources reviews of local businesses, implemented a Pokémon Go filter to help people find restaurants near Pokéstops. Some businesses are even actively using the game to promote themselves, like bars offering discounts to players based on their teams, and animal shelters encouraging players to volunteer and walk dogs in order to build up and find new Pokémon.

Pokémon Go is a massive success, far exceeding expectations. It is breaking Pokémon into the mainstream in a way that the franchise wasn't able to do even at the height of its popularity, when it debuted in America in the late '90s. It immediately secured the number one spots on the Android and iPhone's free and top-grossing charts in the United States upon release in July, and experienced similar chart-topping success as it made its way to the rest of the world.

We talked to the founder of the team responsible for this ubiquitous phenomenon, Niantic's John Hanke, to discover the story behind one of the biggest video game success stories to date.

From Earth Maps to Pokémon

In 2014, Nintendo partnered with Google to play an elaborate April Fool's Day prank. Pokémon were integrated into Google Maps for a brief period of time, allowing people to search for Pokémon based on real-world geography. Despite being billed as a prank, players were enamored, quickly asking for something equivalent to the real thing. Niantic, a company born from Google's map technology, stepped in with a pitch and quickly began development on Pokémon Go.

Hanke has a long history in the world of video games, having worked on one of the first 3D MMOs released, Meridian 59. "I had a chance to soak in the early days of MMOs and some of the first online guilds that got formed and watched the whole social dynamic of that type of game emerge in the early days," Hanke says. From there, Hanke found his way to Google and internally founded Niantic Labs, which broke off as an independent company in 2015. Niantic was founded to develop games and applications that allow people to explore the real world using Google's collected global map information.

The Strange Tales Of Pokémon Go

Niantic's Pokémon-themed augmented-reality game has made headlines in some bizarre ways in recent weeks. Sending people into the real world to play a game has both positive and negative drawbacks. Many national parks have seen a dramatic rise in attendance, attributing the spike directly to people wanting to explore and find Pokémon. A group of Missouri men allegedly used a Pokéstop as a setup to rob players visiting the location. Three of the four men were formally charged with robbery in the first degree and armed criminal action.

A Wyoming woman discovered a dead body while searching for Pokémon, and two men in Encinitas, California were apparently so enamored with the act of catching Pokémon that they walked off a cliff in their distracted states, both sustaining injuries from the fall.

Niantic released its first game, Ingress, in 2012. The science-fiction-themed game encourages competing factions to scour the real-world in pursuit of exotic matter (XM). One faction wants to use XM to force the next human evolution, while another wants to protect civilization from this ingression. The game developed a dedicated fan base, with more than one million active users. Ingress laid much of groundwork for Pokémon Go, with its location data built off the data gathered by Ingress players.

Ingress still has an active community, but Hanke and Niantic always saw it as a platform to be manipulated in different ways. "Within the Niantic team, we were thinking, we built the game, but it's our intent to build a platform, and what would be the next step toward growing the platform?" Hanke says. "Pokémon was the idea that seemed incredibly obvious to us, given the structure of the game, given the fact that it's about chasing Pokémon and capturing Pokémon out in the real world."

Hanke brought the idea to The Pokémon Company, and found that the company had many Ingress players already. "Mr. Ishihara, the CEO of the Pokémon company – I met him maybe a month later, and he was like a level 11 Ingress player, so he compulsively played," Hanke says. From there, development began with the full involvement of the Pokémon Company. Junichi Masuda, programmer, producer, and composer who has been with Pokémon since Red and Blue, worked closely on Go and even coordinated the music and sound. "He has been an invaluable asset for us," Hanke says. "He's been involved in playtesting all the way through, and giving us lots of feedback and helping us shape an experience that's true to the Pokémon world."

In Pokémon Go, players must physically walk around in order to find Pokémon. When they are in the vicinity of a Pokémon, they can then click on the creature and swipe on the screen in order to throw Pokéballs at it to hopefully collect it. Collecting multiples of the same Pokémon lets you evolve and level it up. Inventory items like Pokéballs are obtained by visiting Pokéstops, which are littered all over the world, usually attached to notable landmarks. You can also earn additional experience and currency by training and competing in gyms, which are also distributed through the world like Pokéstops, but at a lower frequency. In many ways, Go captures the core elements of what makes Pokémon games fun – exploring the world and collecting creatures – and translates them into an augmented reality game that allows users to play in a real-world setting.

The selection of Pokéstops and gyms is actually a product of the data collected from Ingress players, who were rewarded in-game for submitting locations. Real-world landmarks function as Pokéstops and gyms, but it's likely your local playground or a business might be a point of interest. "We

Could Pokémon Go Affect Real Estate Prices?

also a gym nearby, so it's already listed as if were an amenity.

established some guidelines: It should be safe and publicly accessible; it should be a work of art, important piece of architecture, or unique local business; and then we had a group of operations personnel that reviewed those submissions and approved the ones that seemed to meet our criteria," Hanke says. You can't submit for new locations within the Pokémon Go app yet, but Niantic has opened up an online form to let people offer up new locations.

THE FUTURE OF POKÉMON GO

Pokémon Go is making its way to the rest of world, and its immense popularity has caused some unforeseen, and frankly strange, problems alongside major achievements in social interactivity. Its international release was delayed, and as of press time players continue to struggle to log in where the game is officially available. For Niantic and The Pokémon Company, it's a problem, but it's a good one to have. "We hoped that the game would be successful and we had ambitious goals for it, but it definitely exceeded our expectations in every way." Hanke says. "Short-term plan is to keep the servers up and to launch in the rest of the countries that we're not in yet."

Right now the game covers the first generation of Pokémon, but that won't last long. The plan is to expand the roster and issue frequent updates. "There will be new clients and server iterations pushed bi-weekly," Hanke says before carefully qualifying his promise. "Treat that as a general rule of thumb. That's more or less the tempo that we're on."

Trading, something not currently allowed at the time of publication, is the next priority for Niantic in terms of new mechanics. Hanke says Niantic wants to integrate ways to "modify and evolve Pokéstops and gyms" without going into further detail.

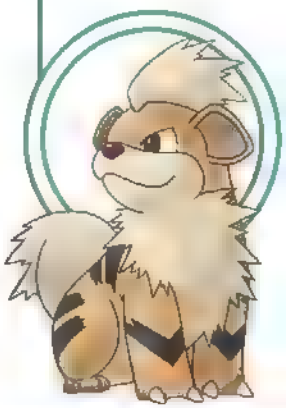
Hanke also seeks to improve the sometimes-obtuse mechanics of playing the actual game, which can often be unclear. Some aspects of the game, like the best time to toss a Pokéball or how to use the radar to seek out nearby Pokémon, are not directly explained with any sort of tutorial or in-game FAQ. "We'll try to make it better. We'll try to make it more clear," Hanke says.

...st 3D MMO, Manifest 55, before spending time with Google

A POKÉMON PHENOMENON

So far Hanke is "very happy" regarding the launch. "We want to get the servers stabilized and launch to the rest of the countries, but I'm delighted and just overwhelmed with the response," he says. Niantic and The Pokémon Company have every reason to be pleased right now. Analysts say the game is already making millions a day, and Nintendo (which owns a third of The Pokémon Company) saw its stock jump 25 percent shortly after the limited release of the game, and in Japan its stock broke the record for most traded stock in a single day this century.

Beyond the immediate financial success of the game, the more impressive feat is how it has executed on its secondary goals outside of those related to collecting pocket monsters. "People getting out, going to new places, making new friends, socializing, and playing with their existing friends out in the real world," Hanke says. "That's awesome to see." ◆



The Good

NINTENDO announced a mini version of the NES featuring 30 built-in games for only $59.99, coming on November 11. The system also comes with an NES-styled controller (although you can also use other Wii/Wii U controllers with it), HDMI cable, and power cord. The list of pre-installed titles includes classics such as Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, Excitebike, Final Fantasy, Donkey Kong, and Castlevania. These games' password-enabled saves have been replaced with multiple save points.

The Bad

FALLOUT 4 on the home systems supports PC mods, but PlayStation 4 fans haven't had the luxury quite yet. Xbox One was the first home system to get them as part of a pre-arranged deal, and the PS4 is supposed to get them eventually, but Bethesda delayed the rollout of the feature and the final release date is still up in the air as of the time of this writing.

The Ugly

BATMAN: Return To Arkham's reveal isn't going so smoothly. The remaster collection featuring Arkham Asylum and Arkham City from the last-generation of systems was rumored as early as this spring. Shortly after it was finally officially announced in May for a late July release, publisher Warner Bros. then delayed the game indefinitely in order to give developer Virtuos Games more time to work on the title. Hopefully the next time we hear about the game, it's for a release date that sticks.

Quotable

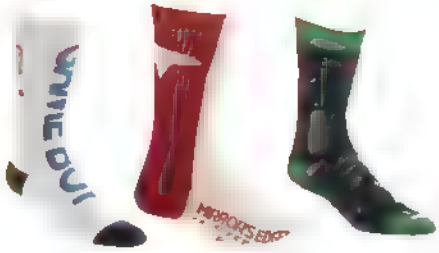
"There's humor and buoyancy, but at the same time there's stakes and jeopardy."

– **Amy Hennig,** creative director of Visceral Games and writer of the first three Uncharted titles, talks about the studio's upcoming Star Wars title.

THE HOTTEST STUFF
FROM THE **POWER UP REWARDS** CATALOG

God of War Kratos Figure

Naruto Golden Mini Figure



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Turbulent Times In The Windy City

An indie studio tackles weighty issues of race, violence, and class in We Are Chicago

It's a difficult time to be an American. The nation is reeling from several high-profile shootings – with police involved as perpetrators and victims – as well as the aftermath from these incidents. Advocates on both sides of the badge are angry and confused about what's going on, and racial tensions that have been simmering for decades are boiling over.

by Jeff Cork

Chicago has seen more than its share of violence. Over 4th of July weekend, 82 people were shot, mostly in the city's impoverished south and west sides. Gang violence is prevalent in those neighborhoods, which seem worlds away from the wealthier areas instead of mere miles.

Culture Shock Games is a small indie studio using that sense of unrest and despair as a backdrop to a project it hopes can inspire change. It's a lofty goal, but the game, We Are Chicago, is a collaborative effort that's drawn in voices from those communities to tell stories that so many of us might not otherwise hear.

Michael Block moved to Chicago from Sheboygan, Wisconsin to attend DePaul University. After graduating, he got a programming job at Phosphor games before forming The Men Who Wear Many Hats with designer Ryan Wiemeyer. Their first game, a zombie-themed sendup of Oregon Trail called Organ Trail, became an indie hit.

All the while, Block was eager to learn more about his new home. "I'd been reading some books about life on the South Side, and it was more about during the '90s and the '80s. And it was like, 'Oh this stuff is really crazy, is any of this still happening?'" he remembers. "We started doing some volunteer stuff on the South Side and talking to people directly and interviewing people. From that it was like, 'Oh, this is a crazy different life experience than five miles away on the North Side, and I don't know anything about it living here in Chicago.' And if I don't know anything about it, people living outside of Chicago definitely don't know anything about it."

The seed for We Are Chicago was planted from a simple question: Can you tell a true story in a game? Block and some of his colleagues formed Culture Shock Games to explore the concept in a first-person, narrative-driven game. After conducting the interviews they crafted a rough skeleton of a story about a young man named Aaron on the week before his high-school graduation, and the different ways his friends and family are coping with the violence around them. They knew this was a narrative they couldn't necessarily tell themselves, so a DePaul professor put them in touch with another former student, a writer named Tony D. Thornton.

"At some point, [Block] needed a writer who could speak to that experience with more authenticity than someone outside of the experience could, and that's when he began to look for someone like myself," Thornton says. "I grew up in the Englewood area, so the things of which I wrote were things that I was familiar with." Still, he had reservations about the project. "You know, I'm 59 years old, I know nothing about video games, I don't play video games," he recalls telling the professor, who said he could handle it.

Thornton was given a skeleton of a storyline, and charged with fleshing it out with dialogue. It was a collaborative effort, with the team pulling him back when Thornton got too wordy, and listening when the longtime Chicagoan had feedback on situations that didn't ring true.

For example, in the original script, Aaron shared a bedroom with his younger sister, Taylor. "I said, 'No, that would never happen. A male and female child wouldn't share the same bedroom in a black family. I can't speak for any other family, but no.'" So Block and his team rearranged it so that Taylor slept in a makeshift bed in her mother's room.

The team got another dose of authenticity from Patrick Sabaitis. A former gang recruiter from the area, Sabaitis left gangs and formed an organization called Reclaim Our Kids. When

Aaron's life isn't just a string of ripped-from-the-headlines moments. Instead, expect quiet family bonding between dramatic events.

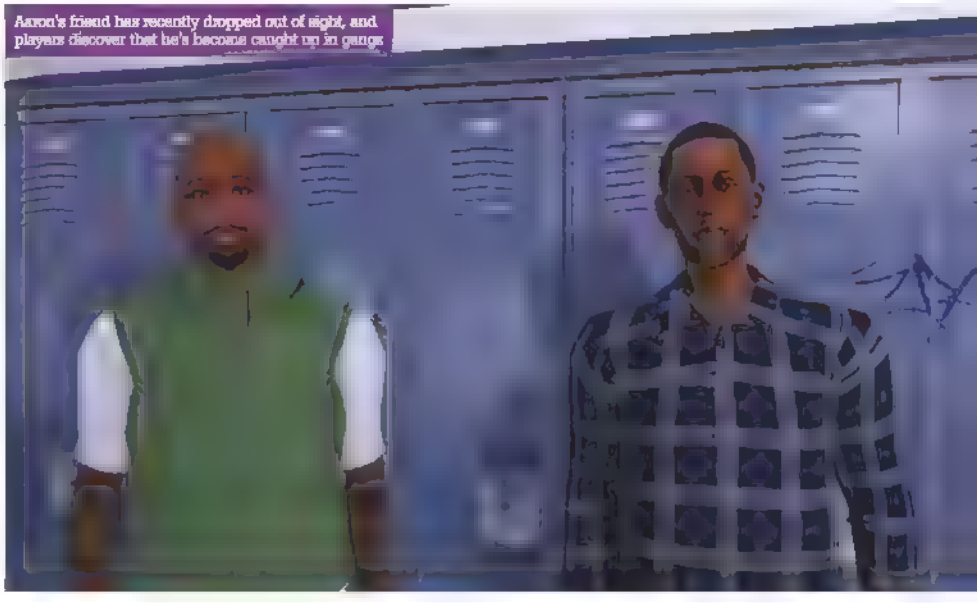
Developer Culture Shock outlined the story for We Are Chicago based on interviews with Chicago residents

he heard about We Are Chicago from some colleagues, he reached out to Block. "He told me about it, and I was like, That's huge. How can we collaborate and partner?'" he says. Block put the actual Reclaim Our Kids materials into the game as brochures that the player can read, and Sabaitis gave the game another tone check.

In one situation, a character was beaten up for not joining a gang. Sabaitis said that the reality is more complicated than that. "They're not going to randomly beat you up because you didn't join their gang," he says, "Now, they might want to take your money or rob you or something, but they're not going to beat you up because you didn't join their gang. It doesn't work that way."

We Are Chicago doesn't pretend to offer any solutions, but Culture Shock Games is hoping that at least it gives players a chance to experience a reality they might not otherwise see. When Block demoed the game at PAX, he watched as some players made offhanded racist comments to friends when they first saw the game. "More often than not the people who would play the game would play for five or ten minutes and they'd get up and talk to their friends while one of their other friends was playing, and they'd be having much more nuanced discussions about the characters," Block says. "Cool – it was working. It was actually having the effect that we were hoping it would have."

That perspective aligns with Thornton's goals for the project, too. "If at the very least it begins a dialogue, that would be an accomplishment in and of itself, because so many people are of the opinion that we're in a post-racial society. If we can't agree that there's a problem, then we certainly can't come to a conclusion about what the proper solution might be. If we can begin a dialogue and begin to understand one another a bit more, that's what I'm hoping the game shows. And you can say, 'There, but for the grace of God go I. If I lived under those same economic and social conditions that these people live under, would I be any different? Would I react any differently than they're reacting? And would I rise any higher than they've been able to rise?' If we can foster just a little bit of understanding and tolerance, then we've done a yeoman's task."



Aaron's friend has recently dropped out of sight, and players discover that he's become caught up in gangs

How To Introduce Your Toddler To Gaming

A chronicle of a father and daughter's journey into the vast interactive world

by Andrew Reiner

Almost four years have gone by since the birth of my daughter, and she's now capable of interacting with sophisticated video games. On the day she was born, a friend jokingly asked me what her first video game would be. My response was to start her with classics, like Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda.

Flash forward four years, and she has already played and completed dozens of games – all of them on my iPhone. I didn't want her introduction to my favorite entertainment medium to be through phone games I've never heard of, but her admiration of them came out of the necessity to keep her entertained at a family event. From that day forward, mobile gaming became a big part of her life.

Most parents who cut their teeth on consoles likely want their kids to follow in their footsteps, but I'm finding the easiest path to accelerating my daughter's gaming development is through a phone. The touchscreen interface replicates many of the same functions as a controller. Compound this with the fact that this generation's consoles have yet to see a game rated EC (for early childhood), and phones are one of the safest avenues for guiding a toddler into the game space.

Great Phone Games For Kids

Parents should tread carefully into the mobile waters and always thoroughly test any downloaded game before handing it to their child. I have downloaded, played, and deleted hundreds of games that were either heavily tilted toward in-game purchase opportunities or had gameplay interrupted by video advertisements. A high percentage of the apps I download are poorly constructed to the point they could impede a child's development given their shoddy functionality.

Most kids games are designed to teach a child something, whether it's the alphabet or memorization. The focus here, however, is introducing your child to legitimate video games. My searches, as unfruitful as they can be at times, have produced a number of great results.

The games I recommend the most come from two development studios – Saga Mini and Toca Boca. These games are designed to be fun interactive experiences. They are non-violent, free of death, and simple to the point that my daughter can understand what she needs to do within seconds of playing them. Both studios have a great understanding of their target audience and gaming in general.

Sago Mini's Road Trip game taught my daughter how to make a car accelerate, and jump in a 2D environment. You may not think much of it at first, but I realized that the interactions in this game resemble a 2D platformer. My daughter has developed the ability to move a character (or car in this case) from left to right in 2D space.

Sago's Space Explorer and Ocean Swimmer titles are just as simplistic in interactions, but offer up a different challenge: learning how to explore open 2D environments, much like The Legend of Zelda.

Taco Boca's titles, like Toca City and Toca School, are geared more for experimentation, allowing kids to dress up characters and tinker with various things in the world. Through these games, my daughter began looking at all environments in games as potential hotbeds for interactivity.

Game Informer associate editor Kyle Hilliard adds that his daughter gained an appreciation for puzzle games by playing Disney's Tsum Tsum on his phone.

Again, the mobile space can be terrible for discovery, but some solid choices are out there for simple interactive fun that double as great educational tools for gaming.

Consoles Are Not Toddler Friendly

Seeing my girl "master" mobile games and have a hunger for more stuff like it led to a graduation to the console space. I feared she wouldn't find consoles interesting, but her eyes lit up, and a smile crept across her face when she controlled a character on a 65-inch television for the first time. She was playing Unravel on Xbox One, and it changed her world. She is now more interested in console gaming than mobile, saying "it's more fun" and "exciting" when asked why she likes it so much. I was amazed how quickly she picked it up. I'm guessing the skill and knowledge she learned on mobile helped immensely.

As much as she loves Unravel, she still doesn't have the motor skills or hand size to play the game correctly. Any interactions requiring the shoulder button lead to bouts of frustration and the controller being handed to daddy or mommy. Unravel, while being largely non-violent, is unfortunately loaded with death. Yarny, the adorable protagonist, can drown or be crushed by rocks – things I don't want my daughter to see repeatedly. We joke about these moments as best we can, but they are disturbing and she sometimes questions what happens to him.

That leads to the big question. What game can she play on console that is free of violence and death? The answer is sadly mostly nothing, unless I take her on a time-traveling adventure to prior console generations. As of this writing, the Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Wii U game libraries do not offer titles geared for toddlers. I've talked to numerous developers who would love to make games for the younger demographic, but say there's no money in it.

Almost every game landing an E for Everyone rating is either a sports, dancing, or racing title. The games that don't fall into these genres usually offer some form of mild violence, like jumping on an animal's head to kill it. Take Snoopy's Grand Adventure, for example. Throw out any thought of it being lighthearted or true to the source material; this is a platformer loaded with violence, and even a battle against a giant, baseball spewing Peppermint Patty head.

Years ago, I recommended parents the Lego and Skylanders titles, both rated E10+. I gave this advice before I had a kid of my own, and in retrospect wish I would have steered them in a different direction. Both of these experiences focus heavily on combat and beating the life out of other characters. Guns, swords, and bombs make them just as violent as any T- or M-rated game, only with a brighter sheen. I don't want my daughter to see this side of the world yet, and it's sad that this is what we consider the standard for kids today.

Create Your Own Games

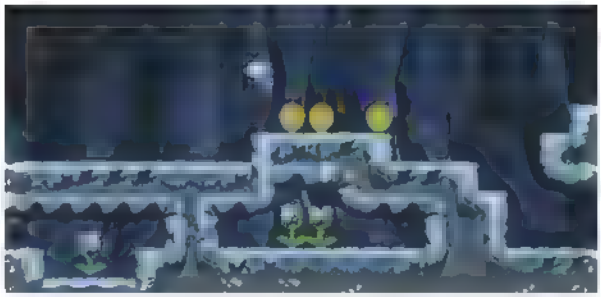
I was close to shelving the idea of introducing my daughter to console gaming at this age until a friend tipped me off on a peculiar idea. He asked me, "Why don't you make your own games for her?" This may sound like a joke, but as I found, anyone can do it.

It doesn't require a degree in programming to make your own experiences. Several games offer deep creation tools that can be tapped to generate whatever you want. I'm using Super Mario Maker to build non-violent levels for my daughter. She doesn't have to kill any goombas to succeed, and none of the pitfalls kill her character. That doesn't mean they are free of challenge, however. The levels are filled with chasms that must be cleared, and snake-like mazes that she has to navigate carefully. She's loving them more than anything else she has played, and is always pushing me to generate more of them. "Harder next time, daddy," she says sometimes. That's music to my ears.

The time to make these stages ranges between 20 minutes and a few hours, depending on how elaborate I want to make the visuals. The basic flow of the stages takes no time at all, and I've even found ways to introduce enemy characters in the mix, whether they are hidden behind walls or disappear before she can be harmed by them.

My daughter has no problem holding the Wii U gamepad, even with her little hands, and is getting better at the game each time she plays it. Could she have learned how to play Mario Maker without first using a phone to mimic the gameplay? Yes, but not at the young age she started playing games on mobile. The ergonomics of the phone allowed her to start before she turned two, and she's been developing a wider skill set ever since then.

LittleBigPlanet 3 is the next game we are looking into. Her introduction into 3D space is currently happening in the



Xbox One game Zoo Tycoon. She obviously doesn't understand any of the zoo management, but is having a blast controlling the keeper, who can feed animals and run around the park. She bangs into walls and gets confused by the camera placement at times, but is enjoying it when she's fully in control.

When she grows a little more and can access the controller's triggers, we're diving into Minecraft and Disney Infinity – two games rich in creation options. Minecraft is a popular kids game I often see recommended to parents, but again, I advocate avoiding the main game with youngsters, as the creepers, spiders, and other lot of enemies can be somewhat terrifying.

Like all aspects of my daughter's life, I've enjoyed watching her develop and her fascination with video games has made me the happiest dad alive. The choices we have in front of us are slim, but we're doing what we can to elevate her understanding of the medium.

Maybe game developers are right in saying there's no money to be made in kids games, but for a father like me who has looked deeply into the choices that have been offered in each console generation, it looks more like an unexplored goldmine than a money pit. We just haven't had a big hit to create a groundswell and truly explore what kids would enjoy. Until that happens, the younger generation will likely gravitate toward phones, as cautious parents steer clear of games that target the older demographic.

Interacting With Interlude

Meet the company that's creating interactive stories for a new generation

How do you get the attention of a multi-tasking generation glued to their phones and tablets? You make it about them. At least that's what a company named Interlude is doing as it reimagines video for an audience typically engrossed in digital content. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

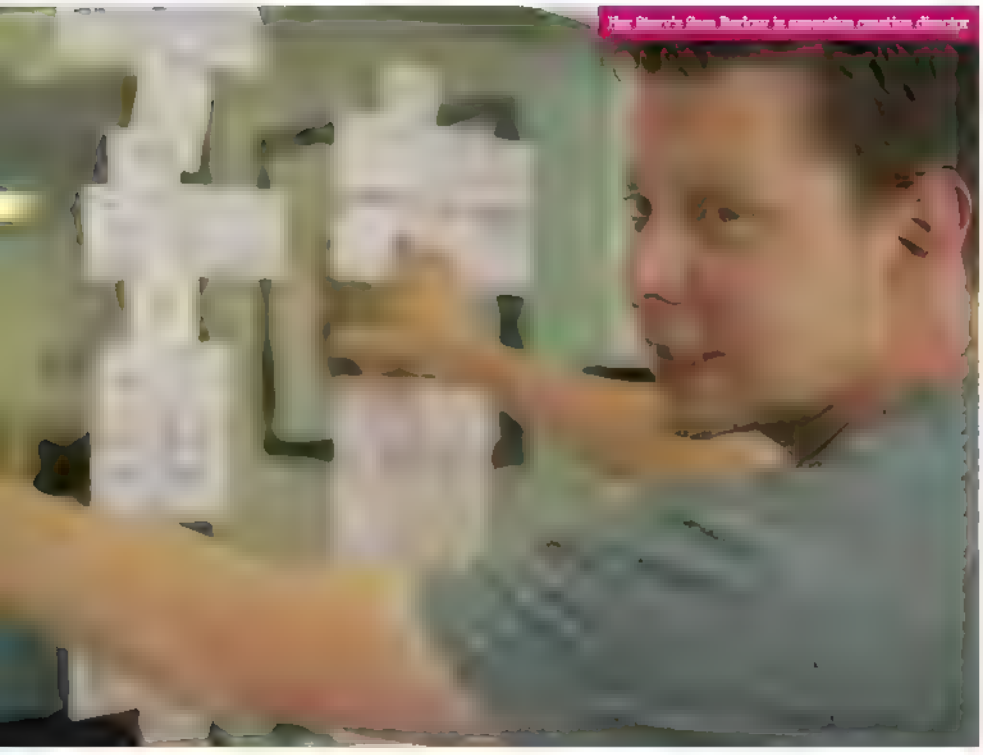
You may not have heard of Interlude just yet, but that's bound to change in the near future. The company focuses on interactive storytelling and has developed software to support branching narratives and changes in viewer perspectives with video, creating an incredibly large number of permutations to foster immersion. So far, Interlude has collaborated with big names across media, such as Disney, Sony, and Universal. This technology has especially turned heads in the music industry, with artists like Coldplay, Led Zeppelin, and Carly Rae Jepsen creating interactive music videos with it.

Now Interlude has signed some big names from the video game industry, such as Her Story's Sam Barlow, BioShock's Ken Levine, and former Microsoft digital and entertainment president Nancy Tellem, best known for her work in TV on series like *Friends* and *Survivor*. This team is tasked with taking interactive video to the next level. Barlow is working on a reimagining of the 1983 classic *War Games* and Levine is lending his talent to an interactive series based on Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*. Both of these are a cross between a video game and film, giving players some agency. With so many promising names and projects on the rise, Interlude is a company to watch. But what's really at the core of it?

Humble Rock Star Beginnings

Interlude got its start in 2010 when co-founder Yon Bloch, an Israeli musician, wanted to create a music video with his band, but he didn't want to make a video you'd watch and soon forget. He desired something that would be fun to watch over and over and involved the viewer in some way. Bloch, who grew up with a Commodore 64 and then became a big PC gamer, looked to video games for inspiration. "I always thought, 'Why would anyone watch a movie when there's a video game?'" Bloch says. "It's playable and you can actually be part of it, which is always [more] exciting."

But when Bloch and his band went to create the video, they noticed that no technology existed that would support online seamless interactive play. Bloch has always been a tech geek and decided to embark on the journey with his band to invent the technology themselves. Suddenly, they had created a new form of entertainment with amazing results. The engagement rate was high (70 to 90 percent), users were eight times more likely to share the video, and viewers were rewatching it on average three times to explore multiple paths. "All of this you never find in linear content, and certainly not in the content that I'm used to in



Her Story's Sam Barlow is executive creative director

televis on," says Interlude chief media officer Nancy Te lem.

Interlude is sti l testing many different ways to interact, from interfacing with the screen to influencing a character's personality. While interactivity can be a loaded term, Bloch is adamant about one thing: you shou dn't realize how you're necessarily influencing it. It can't be as obvious as a choose-your-own adventure book, swinging the story every which way. For instance, in his music video, "Pretend To Be Happy," it's as simple as choos ng between two adjectives and chang ng to different people's perspectives based on what you pick.

For now, Interlude videos work on mobile, tablets, desktops, and TV, but B och would love to add more platforms to the list. When asked if consoles are in the future, Bloch says, "Yes, but we're not announcing anything yet."

Taking Narrative-Focused Experiences Mainstream

Bloch and his team hope Interlude can bring these narrative-focused experiences to a more general audience who are turned off by complex game mechan cs. "What's intrigu ng to me is the abi ity to tel a story wel, whi e you are in some way involved in it," he says. "That's why I love Her Story so much and a lot of the Telltale games. A lot of the th ngs in the gaming industry that are rea y bubbling up right now are very niche, not in the game industry, but in the mainstream population. They don't reach a lot of audiences because they are overshadowed by what peop e think games are."

Bloch notes while most people know what he's ta k ng about when he discusses indie film *Pulp Fiction,* gaming hasn't had that effect on the general population. He sti finds himself needing to explain even triple-A games, such as B oShock, whenever he references them. "It's still not public [know edge] the same way that films and other mediums are," he says. "I feel like if combined correctly, [Interlude] is what can take it to that place. I really believe this is a way to make narrative-based gam ng mainstream."

Te lem came to Interlude because she feels like traditional video models are fa ing flat for the younger generations. "The whole thing that really interested me and the cha lenge that te evision has right now is how do you really reach this younger audience? It's very difficult to create something that is rea y immersive and certainly taking into account all the techno ogy that is very much a very natura part of our day."

Barlow also sees it as the next step in engaging those growing up in the d gital age, and thinks they wi most likely be Interlude's target demographic. "I think we have a younger audience where everyone has grown up and will grow up in a world where everything s customized or reactive," he says. He points to Google as an example of something that alters its content based on the user

Poised For The Future

If anything, Interlude is about blurring lines. You can't fit it into a box, which is what makes it so hard to describe. It's similar to the challenge people face when explaining VR to someone who has never tried it. "When you're doing something that's so in the forefront, it really is difficult for people to conceive it unless they actually see it," Te em says. "Hopefu y with the more videos and the ta ent we have, Interlude wi mean something interpedent y from the company itself."

Bloch has big hopes for what Interlude could become as well. "Imag ne if you could play Her Story exactly as you have, but on Netflix," he says. "That's part of my idea. Blurring those lines. Is it a game? Is it a video? Let the creator make whatever [he or she] wants and not worry if it's an indie game or mature film and being [restricted] by that."

Rethinking Narrative For VR

As a company that wants to stay in line with the latest tech and trends, it's not surprising that Interlude is also investigating VR for its future endeavors. Runaway is an Interlude investor, which gives the team plenty of opportunities to experiment with the latest tech. Interlude co-founder Yoni Bloch says he's tried everything from the Oculus to HTC Vive, but he's not all that impressed with the video content created for the tech yet.

"In virtual reality, it's like you're on fly on the wall that can't fly and it makes it feel very unengaging," he says. "The fact that it's so immersive emphasizes how stuck you are, so we started experimenting. Not to say we're making a game, but video is interactive which is what games are inherently, so we started creating virtual-reality experiences based on video, but that allow you to change what's happening with your interactions as and also manipulate and change the environment."

Inside Barlow's Vision For War Games

Sam Barlow's first project is an interactive reboot of the 1983 War Games film that starred Matthew Broderick and Ally Sheedy. At first, The Her Story creator was hesitant to take on the project. "My reaction was to go, "Ugh. Not a movie-tie in, but then a few seconds later, I started thinking about War Games and what that movie represented, and the themes of that movie, and just started projecting in my head how to revisit that material in the modern day," he says. "Suddenly, I got very excited and started having ideas about how we could do this in an interesting way."

Barlow is interested in exploring new political issues and modern realities with the film, such as government surveillance and terrorism. "What we're trying to do with War Games is find a way to represent the point-of-view of this character who is engaged with the rest of the world digitally in the way that we all are now," Barlow says. "Having a story that's told through lots of different video streams that are all going on simultaneously and allowing the audience to drive that experience by defining what is interesting to this character in this moment."

Sony And Microsoft Continue To Chase Indie Success

While indie projects rarely crest above mammoth triple-A titles in sales numbers, a strong catalog of independent games is also important for a modern console's success. Both Microsoft and Sony continue to chase talented developers who are creating smaller, surprising projects in the independent space. This month, I highlight two of the most promising on the horizon.

Bound is from Plastic, who previously delivered unusual and visually striking projects like Linger in Shadows and Datura. Bound feels like a step deeper into visual experimentation, mixing abstract color, modern art aesthetics, geometric shapes, and the beauty of ballet in a metaphorical dreamscape. I experimented with an early version of the strange adventure; its contemplative musical score and experiential wandering seems deeply inspired by other freeform games, especially thatgamecompany's Journey.

Bound
PlayStation 4, PlayStation VR

Bound opens with an unexpected twist – a pregnant woman arrives by car at a beachhouse, and I guide her along her slow stroll through the sand. She pauses to contemplate the page of an old journal, filled with childlike art. Focus on a particular page for a few moments, and the idyllic beach landscape fades away, replaced by a strange pulsing environment of color and geometric shapes. Within the vision, control flips to a young girl, a princess of an unknown kingdom, and chronicles her journeys along shifting beams and ribbon-like streamers that wind through the world.

The most striking feature is the girl's animation. Every step she takes evokes ballet and modern dance choreography. Her pirouettes, rolls, and jetés replace the normal actions of running and jumping. I often paused in my playthrough, to press different button and direction combos, and watch the way my character interprets those inputs into a new movement vignette.

For all its beauty, Bound rarely ventures into true interactive challenge. Climbing ladders, crossing narrow balance beams, and occasionally leaping between platforms is the limit of its difficulty, but that is not the point. Like the artforms that inspired it, the game is deeply concerned with beauty, interpretation, and eliciting a sense of awe.

As you finish individual sections, the view shifts again, providing a glimpse into flashbulb moments from the pregnant woman's childhood, and hints of a defining event that shaped her future. As these scenes occur, Bound makes its themes apparent. The challenges of parenthood and the unreliability of memory are powerful currents, and the allegorical story leads up to a bittersweet choice in the final act.

While an initial completion of Bound doesn't take much skill, subsequent playthroughs add in a speed-run option. Coupled with occasional branching paths within levels, devoted players should find some fun ways to improve.

My time with Bound was isolated to PlayStation 4, but it is also releasing on PlayStation VR. The shifting and sometimes psychedelic color palette along with the flythrough flashback camera that crops up in certain scenes, make this a game I'm eager to explore in virtual reality. While that experience is still a ways off, you can try out the PS4 version soon – Bound is set to release in the next few weeks.

Far
Xbox One, PC

One of the most intriguing new projects I've been following comes from a Switzerland-based development team called Mr. Whale's Game Service. A first glimpse at **Far** offers a striking visual tableau, where a massive machine rolls languidly across an ancient, dried-up seabed. Day and night cycles overhead, as a tiny figure bustles within the vehicle's bowels. That initial impression is the heart of the experience, but designer and artist Don Schmocker helped clarify what makes it also fascinating.

"Far combines the mechanics and fun of controlling and improving your own vehicle with an adventurous journey through an unknown world," Schmocker says. "The game brings together atmospheric, audio-visual elements of games like Limbo and Journey, with game mechanics from the likes of FTL and This War of Mine, albeit somewhat more forgiving in terms of difficulty."

Gameplay focuses on your tiny machinist's lonely trip within the conveyance, which is a hybrid land and naval vessel with secrets to uncover. "It's a very personal object for our hero and the only reliable shelter on this journey," Schmocker continues. "The vehicle is the key asset, but it's far from self-sufficient. Think of it as 19th-century tech with a few modern twists." As such, you spend a great deal of your time providing maintenance and tweaks, but also adding modifications to keep you moving. In turn, those modifications add depth, since they provide new ways to cope with dangerous situations as they arise along the journey.

Occasionally, the machine must grind to a halt, and your tiny protagonist disembarks to clear the way. When this happens, the camera sometimes zooms out dramatically, communicating a sense of how vulnerable and insignificant you are within the vastness of the world.

Far is particularly intent on exploring feelings of solitude, wonder, and foreboding. "It's a big challenge to keep the player engaged for a long time without something happening every second," Schmocker says. "But the empty landscape helps to build up anticipation for something to happen, which eventually will happen."

Partnered with Mixtvision, Mr Whale's Game Service plans a launch of Far early in 2017 on Xbox One and PC, but the team is also planning a Steam Greenlight campaign much sooner. I love the brazen simplicity and stark imagery the developer is shooting for, and can't wait to get extensive hands-on time and discover what waits deeper in the mysterious desert.

THE TOMB RAIDERS

How one studio is resurrecting the classics

by Javy Gwaltney

In 1994, a Cambridge-based developer named Looking Glass Technologies released System Shock, perhaps one of the most influential games of its time. The game combined first-person shooter with role-playing systems, encouraging the player to proceed with caution through a space station's dangerous corridors and think carefully about their every move. In 1999, Looking Glass released a sequel shortly before closing its doors; Irrational Games, which worked on System Shock 2, carried on the design of the series with the critically acclaimed BioShock. Now nearly 13 years later, a Kickstarter for a remake of the original System Shock has raked in over a million dollars, and a third game in the series is being developed by a team made up largely of developers who worked on the original.

The roads behind the series' sudden resurgence lead back to Nightdive Studios, a small and dedicated team that has, up until this point, dealt solely with acquiring older games, like Turok and The 7th Guest, and making them playable on modern PCs.

Four years ago, Stephen Kick and Alix Banegas were on a trip of self-discovery in Mexico and close to broke. Now not only do they have the keys to the System Shock franchise, but they're remaking the original from the ground up. How they got there is quite the story.

In Search Of Something New

Both Kick and Banegas had been working as character artists for Sony Online Entertainment for a few years before deciding to head off in a new direction. "Alix quit and started her own plushie business," says CEO Stephen Kick. "She did like video game plushies and ended up doing stuff for DOTA 2. During that time I was kind of like a higher up for the character design on Planetside 2 and we just had so many ambitions and wanted to make our own games, and just didn't want to be in a corporate environment anymore because it just sucks it out of you after a while."

The pair quit their jobs and packed up the car before heading down to Mexico with no concrete plan except to just wander for a bit. "We crossed the border into Tijuana and just kept on going, all the way across Mexico," recalls CFO Alix Banegas. The two were in Guatemala when Kick tried to play System Shock 2 on a notebook laptop he had brought along to revisit some of his favorite games, but quickly encountered obstacles.

"I was carrying the CDs and installing the game, and I'm getting all these errors right off the bat," he says. "So immediately I go on the internet and start looking for fanmade patches, just anything I can get to get the game running again. I go on GOG.com, it's gotta be there, and it's not. There's no legal way to purchase this game. There's no way to play it on anything newer than Windows XP. And the whole experience just opened up this sort of mystery trail: This is one of the best games ever made. How is there no way to play it?"

That question eventually led Kick and Banegas to form their own business dedicated to letting customers play games thought to be lost to the ravages of time.

Taking The Plunge

Kick spent some time researching why System Shock 2 was unplayable on modern systems. He discovered both a growing demand for a playable version of the game as well as the identity of the company that owned the rights to the series. Star Insurance Company had obtained Looking Glass Studios' assets after the company closed its doors in 2000. Curious about the status of the series' rights and whether Star had any plans for them, Kick sent them a cold email. Surprisingly, he received a reply the next day. "They wrote me back asking what I wanted to do, if I wanted to make a third game," he says. "I'm in the middle of the jungle at the time [with] no money, and Star Insurance had me on a phone call with their head council."

According to Kick, Star was wary about doing anything with the rights due to how expensive it would be to create a sequel. Kick went another route, pitching them on re-releasing System Shock 2 in a playable state on Steam and GoodOldGames.com (GOG). He showed them the sizable wishlist for the game on GOG as evidence that there was a demand for such a re-release. He eventually persuaded Star with the potential profit and borrowed money from friends and family to pay for the licensing fee.

Around the same time, Kick discovered an anonymous modder had created a patch that made System Shock 2 playable on modern systems. "I had already been in contact with friends and programmers to create a team to make this work, and this person in France had basically released this file so that all you had to do was stick it in the system directory of System Shock 2," Kick says

Controversy struck when Kick and Banegas launched their version on Valentine's Day, 2013. "It was kind of strange when we released because the System Shock 2 community was like 'How dare this company come out of nowhere and take the work from modders and claim ownership of this stuff?' It was a big mess,'" Kick says. "I didn't intend for any of that to happen, and we did not claim that we did the work. We tried to reach out to this person, but they wished to remain anonymous."

According to Banegas, the first sales report revealed good news in spite of the controversy. "At the end of the month, it was abundantly clear from our first sales report that this was a viable business, a sort of niche that we could hit the ground running with and that's what we did," she says. "So here we are."

After System Shock 2's success, the venture quickly became a business, one that Kick and Banegas named after one of their shared passions. "During our trip we did a lot of diving, particularly night dives, going down to the bottom of the ocean where it's completely dark and only having this cone of light from your torch and there's just so much to see down there, so much treasure and you just never know what you're going to find," Kick explains. "So we kind of made that analogy. We go out and look for places where people haven't been in a long time to bring back these forgotten classics to polish them and clean them up and make them playable again, available for everybody. So it all kind of fell into place. We reached out to other people through various sources who might have connections and we just started accumulating these licenses."

Moving Forward By Going Backward

The newly formed Nightdive started focusing on acquiring adventure staples and cult classics from the '90s. Four years later, the studio has touched up and released nearly 100 titles including Turok, The 7th Guest, and Sword of the Samurai. Kick says they ended up using the studio's profits to purchase the rights to System Shock from Star Insurance in August 2015, fully intending to remake the original game.

"We had such a wide network of artists, programmers, developers that we could light the Flame of Gondor and everyone would come," Kick says. "It was just a matter of these pieces falling into place so we could get started."

It turns out he wasn't wrong. The Kickstarter campaign boasts recognizable talent from across the industry, including Chris Avellone, a designer who worked on Baldur's Gate and Fallout: New Vegas, as well as the concept artist for the original System Shock, Robb Waters. The majority of the development team is remote, with members working from San Francisco and New Zealand, while Banegas and Kick continue to run Nightdive out of their home in East Vancouver.

"This is basically the entirety of Nightdive Studios," Kick says, introducing a small office, filled to the brim with artwork from H. R. Giger, comic books, and model lightsabers. He opens a closet to reveal shelves upon shelves of boxed copies of PC games from the '90s; several of them have signatures from developers like Tim Schafer scribbled across them in sharpie. "I like to get a boxed copy of every game we try to acquire, even the ones that don't work out," he says, flashing a copy of Bad Day on the Midway, a game that Nightdive was close to closing the deal on before the original programmer revealed that he had accidently thrown away the source code. "Now this game just might never come back, might never be playable again," Kick says, sliding the box back onto the shelf. "Unless you just happen to have a Windows 95-era PC. That was really... that was heartbreaking, you know? We were so close."

Bad Day on the Midway isn't the only game lost to time, as Nightdive has also been unable to acquire the rights to other classics, though Kick refuses to say that these are lost causes

No Game Lives Forever

While Nightdive has successfully acquired the rights to nearly a hundred games and re-released them on digital platforms, there have been several games that Nightdive couldn't pull across the finish line. The classic, espionage-themed first-person shooter No One Lives Forever remains the most notable loss. Though Nightdive spent a large amount of time and effort trying to acquire the rights for the franchise, multiple publishers were involved in the deal and none of them could come to agree on which company owned which parts of the game. Eventually Nightdive had to abandon the project. "We even had posters made," says Nightdive CEO Stephen Kick, showing off a trove of custom posters in his garage that the studio had made to celebrate the re-release that never came. "We'll probably give them all away in the end," he continues. "Nothing else we can really do with them."

"Part of my whole mission is to just not be indiscriminate with which games we bring back, to give everything a fair chance," he says. "But if it's too cost prohibitive, we kind of have to put it on the back burner for a while."

Though Kick and Banegas plan to keep on touching up and re-releasing games, right now the company's priorities lie with making the System Shock remake a reality. A great deal of anticipation and expectation both fuels the project and creates unique obstacles, but the duo are excited and ready for the challenge of bringing series back to the spotlight – in more ways than one.

In December 2015, Otherside Entertainment (formed by Paul Neurath, the creator director of Looking Glass Studios) revealed it was developing System Shock 3. This sent ripples of confusion throughout the community, since it was well known that Nightdive had purchased the rights to the series. The answer's pretty simple: Nightdive gave Otherside Entertainment permission to make the game. "Our relationship with Otherside is amicable," Kick says. "We licensed them the rights to do the third game. That was just a conscious choice, like it had to be done, right? It's the majority of the original team. Who better than them to make the next one?

"I think ultimately when I look back on it, there was a seed that had been planted in my head from the beginning that we would get this license and eventually be responsible for doing System Shock 3. We're going to work with the original creators, all this sort of stuff that was pipe dream at the time, and now that it's all happening and all these pieces are in place, more than anything I'm thrilled to see that Shock is coming back. It deserves it."

Nightdive Studios has carved out a strange, unique path for itself, one that could have only happened with the opportunities offered by the era of digital distribution. While the developer has proven itself as an outfit capable of preserving games thought to be lost, whether or not it can create a quality game from the ground up is still a question yet to be answered. However, the studio's passion for revitalizing the past for a new generation to enjoy is unmistakable and a necessary foundation for pulling off the Herculean task of not just restoring a masterpiece but making it as shockingly good as it was all those years ago. ◆

The Rest

During the four years that Nightdive has been in operation, the company has re-released a number of titles that have been out of circulation for years. Here are some of the most

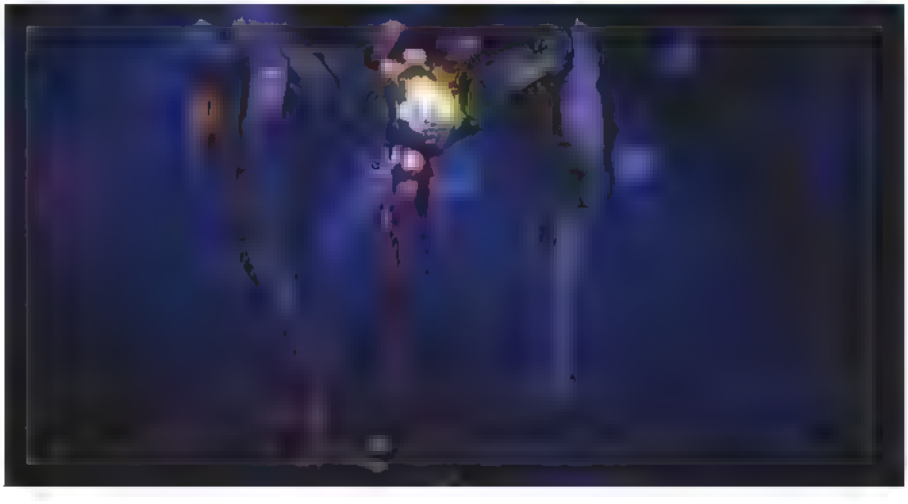
who's lost his memory. It sounds a bit cliché by modern standards, but for its time, The 7th Guest was notable for its integration of live-action footage and spooky atmosphere.

Eradicator – One of the more enjoyable Doom clones to be released in the '90s, Eradicator was a bloody first-person shooter romp with three selectable protagonists.

Tex Murphy Series – Tex Murphy is a sci-fi adventure series starring a down on his luck private eye trying to solve mysteries in a radiated, futuristic version of San Francisco. Tex

single-player adventure that

Pinball Illusions – Pinball Illusions is probably best known as a classic Nintendo series that had you blasting dinosaurs, but there was a PC port as well, one that Nightdive has touched up and re-released. The developer also



Breakable Objects

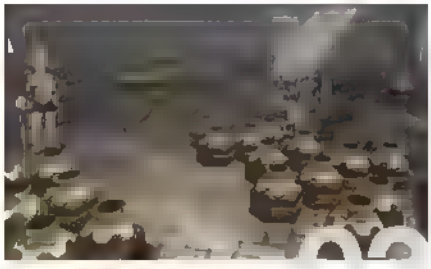
by Kyle Hilliard

Explosive Barrels

The explosive barrel is a video game cliché. It's as common as the pause button, but that doesn't mean we get any less excited about them when they appear. They are a saving grace as often as they lead to accidental death, but that's just its nature and we forgive it.

Wooden Crates

Always fun to break apart, the wooden crate is the worst way to store your possessions if you don't want someone to steal them. Whether we hit them with crowbars, knives, or bullets, watching them splinter apart is always a joy.



Vases & Pots

Second only to Ganondorf on Link's list of dislikes, the vase (or pot) is an object that demands it be destroyed just by existing. Hearing the telltale shatter as it collapses into the ground or against a wall is always worth the time it takes to pick it up.

Bricks

Sometimes you throw them, or break them with a bouncing ball, but usually they float above you and you hit them with your head in exchange for coins. Shigeru Miyamoto recently claimed Mario actually breaks them by holding a fist above his head, but what does he know?

Windows

Whether you're shooting, running, jumping, diving, tripping, rolling, meandering, throwing an object, throwing another player, or even dancing through a window, it's always fun. There is just something joyous about being involved in an act that uses the verb "shatter."

Cars

Cars are great for getting to work or taking the kids to school, but they're even better as punching bags and missile receivers. Beating them up in Street Fighter and blowing them up in GTA is always a highlight, and they come included with a whole bunch of the previous entry.

Fire Hydrants

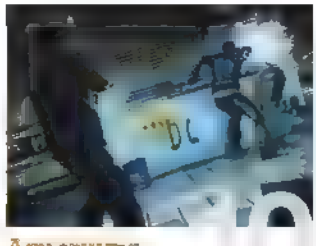
It's not necessarily the act of destroying a fire hydrant as much as it's the follow-up display. You're basically doing the city a favor by running them over or accidentally involving them in a skirmish. How else are hot kids going to cool off?

TVs & Monitors

We all remember the first thing we did when we finally fully controlled Batman in Arkham Asylum. It wasn't pursuing the Joker. We whipped out a batarang, threw it at a TV, and watched the screen shatter. At that moment we knew we were in for something special.

Watermelon

We've destroyed plenty of food during our time in virtual worlds, but none have been quite as satisfying as destroying the watermelon. There is a reason comedian Gallagher was able to craft an entire career out of destroying the green fruit – it's fun.



Aquariums

Placing an aquarium in a video game is basically asking for some kind of fight to break out. It's not our fault the bad guys knowingly put fish into a dangerous scenario. We're just here to save the day.

Do
Re
Mi
...
SO SWEET YOU
CAN'T HELP BUT CHEW.
WRIGLEY'S
Juicy Fruit
A Sweet Piece of Fun.

Embrace Your **Destiny**

1 Destiny Mega Bloks

You've spent hundreds of hours building your Destiny character, but it will only take you a few minutes to put together these Lego-like recreations of Destiny vehicles and enemies, which include Sparrows and Fallen Walkers. These construction sets come packaged with Mega Bloks' most detailed micro action figure to date, so you can stage your own sci-fi shootouts and then take them apart and rebuild them to be better than before – just like Bungie did with Destiny.

Starting at $15.99 | *megabloks.com*

2 Celestron NexStar 6 SE Telescope

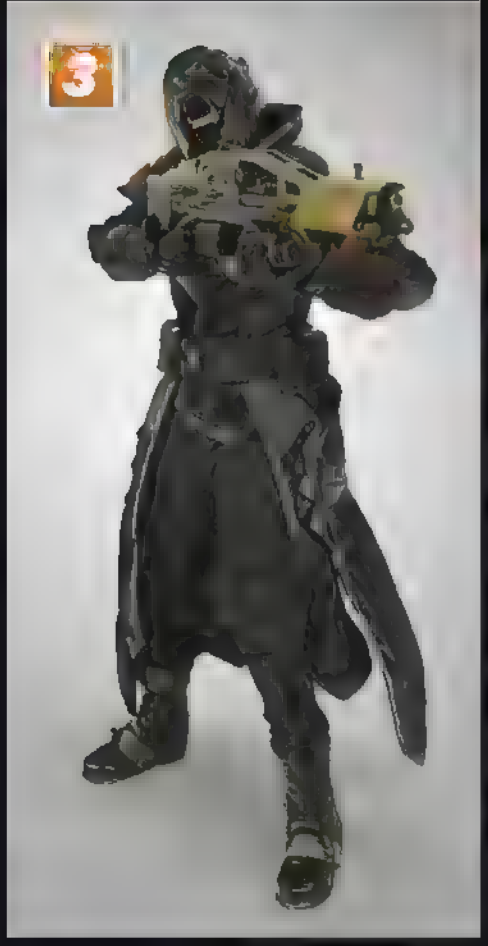
Get a closer view of the planets you've been exploring in Bungie's massive shooter with this high-powered telescope. The Celestron's six-inch aperture and superb light-gathering tube provide an impressive view of the night sky, and its fully automated mount automatically locates and tracks over 40,000 celestial objects. Maybe you'll be able to find the Hive Fortress on the Moon that astronomers have been glossing over for years.

$799 | *celestron.com*

3 3A Collectible Warlock Figure

3A Collectibles' 1/6 scale Titan figure turned a lot of heads when it was revealed last year, but Warlock and Hunter players were left high and dry, until now. Bungie's exclusive black Warlock is enticing. Featuring tailored fabric clothing and game-accurate armor, this figure comes with an impressive arsenal that includes The Stranger's Rifle, Murmur, Jolder's Hammer, and Thorn. Orders won't start shipping until next Spring, but you'll want to pre-order now to secure it.

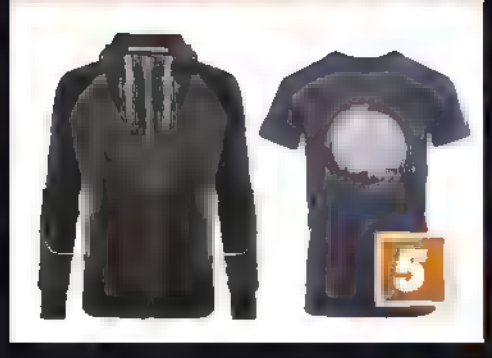
$190 | *bungiestore.com*



4 Official Destiny Art Prints

Take down those family photos, it's time to make room for something you actually want to look at. These hand-numbered art giclee prints from Cook & Becker feature the official concept art Bungie used while developing Destiny's world, and come with a certificate of authenticity hand-signed by the artists.

Starting at $90 | *candb.com*



5 Merchoid Destiny Shirts

Your Destiny avatar is decked out in the finest exotic armor, but you're still wearing scrubby T-shirts? Time for an upgrade. Thanks to Merchoid's collection of officially licensed Destiny hoodies and T-shirts you'll look good both on and off-world.

Starting at $22.99 | *merchoid.com/brand/destiny*

D IS FOR DESTINY – AN EARLY ADVENTURE BOOK

Our school system is failing to teach our children about the Traveler's Sphere or how to navigate the Vault of Glass, but you can start your kids off right by teaching them the ABCs using adorable pictures of armored warriors and the monsters they subdue.

$17.99
simonandschuster.com

HALO MYTHOS: A GUIDE TO THE STORY OF HALO

Still fascinated by Bungie's earlier work? This comprehensive tome chronicles the entire timeline of the Halo universe. Filled with details from the games, books, and live-action shows, as well as 50 specially commissioned full color paintings, this book is the ultimate guide to Microsoft's premier shooter.

$35.00
bloomsbury.com

THE TETRIS EFFECT: THE GAME THAT HYPNOTIZED THE WORLD BY DAN ACKERMAN

In the early 1980s, Alexey Pajitnov worked tirelessly behind the Iron Curtain on a simple puzzle game that inadvertently became an international sensation. Technology reporter Dan Ackerman dives into the sordid history of Tetris, a tale that plays out like a corporate espionage Cold War thriller.

$25.99
danackerman.com

New Hardware Questions Outweigh The Answers

by Joe Juba, Senior Reviews Editor

Normally, the unveiling of new hardware is one of the most exciting events in the gaming industry. Hardware evolution carries the promise of new experiences, and those experiences ultimately serve as the motivation for consumers to purchase new consoles. However, that hasn't been the case with the latest wave of console upgrades. Though recent months have brought us confirmation on upcoming tech from Sony (PlayStation 4 Neo), Microsoft (Project Scorpio), and Nintendo (NX), none of those companies have clearly articulated how these new devices will move gaming forward.

To some degree, the lack of concrete information is expected. The systems are months away from release, so some might argue we don't need to know now, because we'll know eventually – but that misses the whole point of announcing new hardware early. When unveiling this technology, companies should provide a vision of the future to anticipate. To build excitement, gamers need concrete knowledge of what will change; they need to picture themselves with the new products, and wish the technology was in their hands right now. This is where all three of the console manufacturers are failing, relying on brand loyalty and vague assurances to stand in for details and clear direction.

Sony has currently offered the least insight regarding its plans for the PlayStation Neo, but has also made the fewest promises. In the wake of leaked technical specifications, Sony Interactive Entertainment president Andrew House would only confirm that the system exists, with no official announcements regarding its capabilities or release date. "It is intended to sit alongside and complement the standard PS4," House told the *Financial Times*. "We will be selling both [versions] through the life cycle." Beyond that, no other details of the system have been confirmed. While this conservative approach is the least likely to disappoint, Sony's refusal to showcase the system at E3 is confusing. If PlayStation Neo isn't important enough to show off at the world's largest video game convention, then why even announce it in the first place?

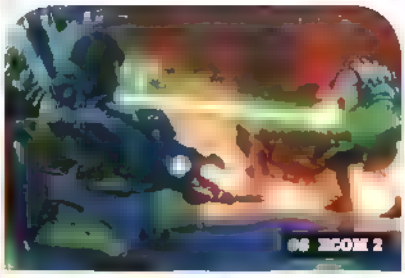
Microsoft took a different approach to its new Xbox One. With Project Scorpio's unveiling, the company painted a rosy picture of a future filled with limitless power, 4K gaming, and VR readiness – but this was more flash than substance. In the following days, none of Microsoft's spokespeople were on the same page when it came to articulating the system's key features or benefits. Maybe the framerate will be better, but maybe not. Maybe it will benefit players who don't have 4K televisions, but maybe not. These are the important questions for which Microsoft delivered conflicting answers – and if its own creators don't have a clear vision for what Project Scorpio represents, gamers certainly won't.

Of all of the companies with new tech on the horizon, Nintendo's unwillingness to talk about its new system is the most puzzling. Unlike the Neo and Project Scorpio, the NX is presumably more than just an upgrade to existing hardware. Considering that the Wii U's lifespan is effectively over, one would think that Nintendo would be eager to turn the page and get its fans looking toward the future. That's not happening. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is the flagship title for the NX, but the game's presence on the E3 show floor was focused exclusively on the Wii U version. We're talking about a new system that is only months away, and instead of jumping ship on the Wii U, Nintendo is riding a derelict vessel over the waterfall.

Getting excited is difficult when you have no clear idea how these new systems will improve your experience when you're holding the controller. But another reason clarity is important goes beyond generating basic enthusiasm; many gamers are worried about what this upcoming iterative cycle means for the future of gaming. Incremental upgrades may work for mobile phones, but the gaming industry is a different business with different expectations. Consoles are also seen as a major investment, and buying a new version is less appealing if you think that a better iteration is inevitable in a year or two. The lack of a clear road map from Microsoft and Sony on this topic leaves the door open for consumers to fear the worst.

Despite my frustration with the companies' current messaging, I am excited to see what these systems can do. Right now, I enjoy imagining the ways my gaming experiences can be improved with Neo, Project Scorpio, and NX – and maybe that's intentional. The longer Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo wait to nail down specifics, the longer their new ventures live in the realm of infinite possibility, and the longer the current hardware iterations are consumers' only real options.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer.



September

2016

01 World of Tanks: The Comic Book

The idea of World of Tanks fiction may not sound great, but when it's written by comic legend Garth Ennis *(Preacher)* and drawn by Carlos Ezquerra *(Judge Dredd)*, it becomes a must read. The first issue streets today.

02 PAX West

One of the most upbeat and entertaining gaming expos of the year returns today, and runs through September 5. PAX West offers hands-on time with upcoming games, panels, speakers, and is one of the best places for people watching as cosplayers are out in full force. The show is sold out, but tune in to gameinformer.com for all of the breaking news.

06 New Releases

- Touhou Genso Rondo: Bullet Ballet *(PS4)*
- XCOM 2 *(PS4, Xbox One)*

13 New Releases

- BioShock: The Collection *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- NASCAR Heat Evolution *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- NHL 17 *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Psycho-Pass: Mandatory Happiness *(PS4, Vita)*
- ReCore *(Xbox One, PC)*

14 GameStop Expo 2016

Open to the public, GameStop Expo is held in Anaheim's Convention Center, and is a place where you can play most of 2016's upcoming games. More than 90 publishers and vendors are on hand, and you can take part in the Ultimate Gamer Preview, which is a guided look at over 50 upcoming games.

15 Tokyo Game Show 2016

This year's E3 didn't offer much in terms of JRPGs, but we're hopeful that titles like Ni no Kuni II and Kingdom Hearts III are represented in a big way at this year's Tokyo Game Show, running from today through July 18.

16 New Releases

- Dragon Quest VII: Fragments of the Forgotten Past *(3DS)*

20 New Releases

- Air Conflicts: Double Pack *(PS4)*
- Criminal Girls 2: Party Favors *(Vita)*
- Destiny: Rise of Iron *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- NBA 2K17 *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)*

23 The Magnificent Seven

Chris Pratt and Denzel Washington lead a star-studded cast in *The Magnificent Seven*, a remake of the old west film that tells the story of seven gunmen coming to the aid of a city in need. No, this is not a comedy. Here's hoping Pratt knows this.

27 New Releases

- Forza Horizon 3 *(Xbox One, PC)*
- Shantae: Half-Genie Hero *(PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)*
- Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice *(3DS)*

29 League Of Legends World Championship

The month-long League of Legends tournament kicks off today and concludes with the Summoner's Cup finals on October 29, which is being held in Los Angeles' Staples Center. Last year's finals were watched by more than 36 million people. The winning team (SK Telecom T1) walked away with $1 million in prize money.

30 Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children

Ransom Riggs, a writer for Sucker Punch's Infamous, penned the novel *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*. That book has been adapted into a movie by Tim Burton, and opens in theaters today. It looks like an X-Men film with a heavier focus on magic.

30 New Releases

- Final Fantasy XV *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Yo-Kai Watch 2 *(3DS)*

30 Gaymer X: Year Four & Twitch Con 2016

Two fun gaming conventions kick off today. Gaymer X: Year Four is held in Santa Clara, CA, from today through October 2. Twitch Con 2016 runs the same days in San Diego. Both conventions offer a plethora of events, panels, and gaming sessions. ◆

» **PLATFORM**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **STYLE**
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

» **DEVELOPER**
Bungie

» **RELEASE**
September 20

DESTINY: RISE OF IRON

BUNGIE EMBRACES PLAYER CHOICE IN THE FIRST GAME'S CONCLUDING YEAR

BY MATT MILLER

Nearly two years have passed since Destiny arrived, smashing even ambitious estimates of its potential popularity and reach. Having rapidly evolved from a single release into a patchwork of expansions and updates, Bungie's open-world epic now stands on the threshold of its third and final year before the announced sequel arrives.

More than many games, Destiny has shifted and evolved in response to a vocal and passionate community, and last year's The Taken King expansion went a long way to reinventing the game's core systems. A year after that launch, Rise of Iron is poised to release with a surety of purpose and little need to revamp. Instead, this major expansion recognizes an army of veteran Guardians with divergent interests that are hungry for choices, while making it easier than ever for new players to find a gameplay niche and join the fun. The Iron Lords have returned, and they've brought a wealth of new places, enemies, weapons, and adventures to conquer.

AT A GLANCE

Rise of Iron has a lot to discover. Jump to your favorite feature.

// Five mission campaign, plus additional missions and quests (p. 42)
// Felwinter Peak, a new social space (p. 42)
// Explore the Plaguelands (p. 42)
// The Devil Splicers, Rise of Iron's new enemies (p. 44)
// The Archon's Forge, a new cooperative arena (p. 44)
// New and reimagined strikes (p. 45)
// Wrath of the Machine, Destiny's latest raid (p. 45)
// Artifacts reinvented (p. 46)
// New light cap (p. 48)
// Armor sets, weapons, and rewards (p. 48)
// Ornaments, a brand new customization option (p. 49)
// The future of Destiny (p. 51)
// Supremacy, new PvP mode (p. 52)
// Four Crucible maps (p. 53)
// Iron Banner reinvented (p. 53)

RETURN OF LEGENDS

Rise of Iron has a unique starting point for its storytelling, and one that capitalizes on the mysteries already established within the mythology. "We wanted to tell a different kind of story," says game director Christopher Barrett. "The Taken King was very much about revenge, and hunting down this big bad monster. House of Wolves before that was about tracking down these criminals that had betrayed the queen – an outlaw story. In this case, we thought it would be really interesting to tell the story of a figure that you're familiar with, and learn their backstory."

While an insidious tech virus and its mutation of the Fallen are still a big part of the experience, individual characters like Lord Saladin and the history of the wider Destiny universe are the central hook this time around. The Iron Lords have been alluded to since the launch of Destiny, and their tragic tale is at the heart of Rise of Iron.

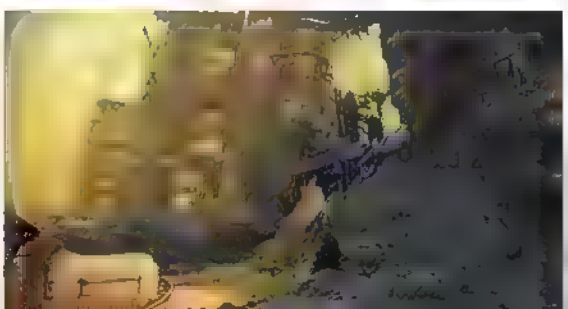
For players, the names of the greatest Iron Lords have been nothing more than monikers attached to weapons acquired during the monthly Iron Banner tournament – Radegast, Felwinter, Jolder, and all the rest. The Iron Banner PvP event demands the best of players, providing rewards only to those who win, and unlike normal Crucible play, challenging Guardians to enter battle with the absolute best equipment. As the Iron Banner's host, Lord Saladin has been an enigma – the seeming last survivor of a doomed order of paladins who once fought for humanity.

As Rise of Iron begins, Saladin's purpose for governing the Iron Banner becomes clear. The battles we've been fighting for two years weren't just to memorialize his lost friends, but to prepare for the day when a technology called SIVA appears again. The scourge was sealed away in a terrible moment of sacrifice by eight of the Iron Lords, and Saladin has spent the years since standing sentinel and preparing. As a contingent of Fallen assault the outpost where the Iron Lords once headquartered, your Guardian is the first to respond, leading to the dawning realization that a horrific threat has reemerged.

Themes of honor, sacrifice, and memory are woven throughout the new storyline, and much of that narrative weight is carried by Saladin. With his helmet finally removed, Saladin is revealed as a stern and imposing warrior, but one haunted by his losses. His previous appearances as a vendor and Crucible taskmaster have felt distant, but this new content puts him front and center. Numerous cinematic sequences show Saladin's interaction with the player's Guardian, and simultaneously offer an avenue to communicate some of the history of his order. "We wanted to play with nostalgia, not only through the story of Lord Saladin, but players' nostalgia as well, as they return to the place they started the game," Barrett says.

If previous story elements have shown the way that our new Guardians have risen to heroism, Rise of Iron is all about how this new generation of warriors take the reins. "We learn of the Iron Lords and what happened to them long ago, when they sacrificed themselves to save humanity," Barrett says. "In the process of you discovering that story, Lord Saladin enlists you to help bury the past, confront this threat from long ago, and in the process pass the torch, so that you yourself become an Iron Lord."

Along the way, Bungie aims to present the Destiny universe as a living place, touched by time. To drive the point home, the adventures take you back to Old Russia, now covered in snow and littered with the detritus of your earlier battles there, and then into an infected landscape beyond the wall. We visited Bungie to play through this new chapter of the Destiny saga.



Rise of Iron opens on a snowclad mountainside, as my Guardian and her Ghost arrive at a long-forgotten outpost on Earth. The Fallen are up to no good once again, and my climb to the ancient fortress at the mountain's peak provides my first taste of a new Destiny story mission in months. As I ascend along an ancient but still-powered gondola, familiar Fallen foes take potshots from the cliffs. At the top, the intricate stonework and majestic architecture suggest this is more than a simple lookout station. The return of an old enemy in a new form, Sepiks Perfected, tells me that control of the place is a priority for the Fallen.

This is a first for Destiny – a story mission that opens the door on a brand-new social space. "You're taking back Felwinter Peak," Taylor says. "You first encounter it in the first mission. Saladin has tasked you with protecting this temple that is under siege. Later on, you get summoned back, and you see that the space has changed. There's a bounty board, you meet these new characters, and Saladin is now there." Tiered stairways climb to an elevated mausoleum in which statues of dead Iron Lords loom in the darkness. New vendors and mission-givers, like the old Awoken archivist Tyra Karn, and Cayde's trusted scout, Shiro-4, wait upon the mountain. Wolves lounge about, yawning and growling as they share in the retreat.

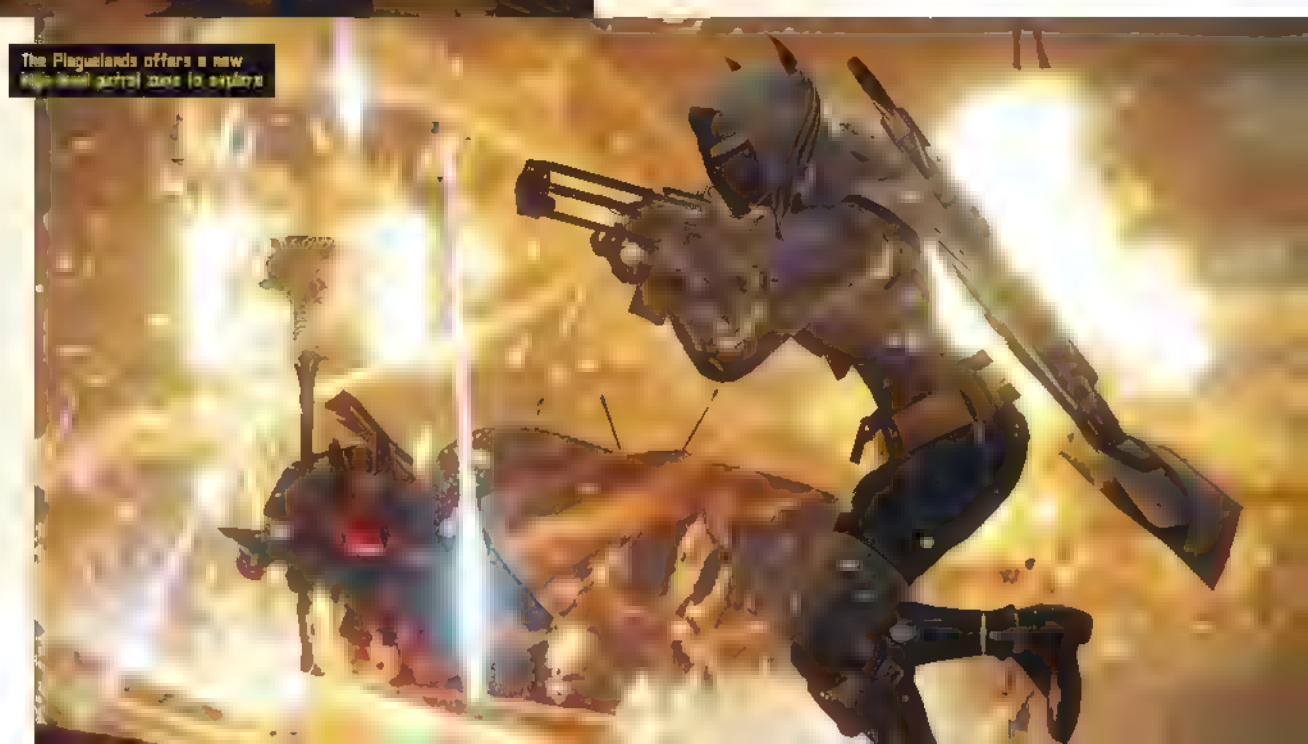
The Supremacy game mode favors tightly clustered groups, but supers are a constant danger

"There are lots of secrets," Barrett says. "There's this whole portion of Felwinter Peak that is normally locked, except during special events. There may be some secret ways to get back there. There's this whole big space that will be perfect for things like playing hide and seek." Felwinter Peak doesn't dramatically change what I expect out of a hub space, but as I continue to uncover content, it's fun to return to a new home base on the front lines of the current conflict.

Setting out from the Iron Lords' ancient holdfast, the missions provide a chance to explore the Plaguelands – a vast new outdoor area adjoining the Cosmodrome. The Plaguelands lie beyond a breach in the Cosmodrome's wall, and a blanket of snow reinforces that time has passed since Ghost first revived my Guardian in a nearby highway graveyard. Emerging from the wall, the Plaguelands stretch out before me from a high, raised ridge. "Even when you first walk out onto the bluff at Lord's Watch, you get this vista of the entire Plaguelands," Barrett says. "I love that you can see it all spread out in front of you."

Off to the right, a beached tanker ship promises battle against snipers hidden among the exposed decks. To the left are massive AA guns, keeping Guardian ships at bay. Behind me, I can journey back into some areas of the Cosmodrome, now overcome by blizzard. In the distance far ahead below the bluff, a fiery tower contrasts against the white, where lava pours in rivers from timeworn pipes. "The Plaguelands have been sealed off since the Iron Lords left it," says executive producer Scott Taylor. "No one has been here in many years. Now that the Fallen are back here, you're rediscovering this space even as it's being overrun."

The deeper I travel into the Plaguelands, the area's appellation becomes ever more suitable. Disturbing red tentacles stretch between walls and ceilings. Dark orange scorch marks indicate the passage of some juggernaut destructive force, like a massive rampaging werewolf that has torn its way through buildings. Clouds of tiny crimson particles rise from pulsing clusters, damaging me if I get too close. All of it speaks to the game's new infectious threat. SIVA is a forgotten acronym for a miraculous technology, and its potential for both wonder and horror is substantial. "SIVA was developed during the golden age – this powerful nanotechnology that, when programmed, could become anything they wanted," Barrett explains. "They used it to build cities. That's one of the things that allowed the great expansion of the golden age." But for all its remarkable power, SIVA is only as good as the knowledge and wisdom of its controller, and it has now come into the hands of the Fallen.



The Plaguelands offers a new high-level patrol zone to explore

A GUARDIAN'S GEAR

Rise of Iron offers more viable weapons and armor than ever before, through the introduction of a host of brand-new gear, the reintroduction of some Year One options, and the ability to seamlessly transition any of your favorite equips from Year Two. Check out some of the coolest options.

The new raid entitled Wrath of the Machine offers sleek and futuristic armor

This auto rifle teases out what players can expect from the renewed Iron Banner rewards

An entirely new set of armor awaits for those willing to confront the Trials of Osiris

The new sun relic is a devastating tool of destruction

The Fallen Splicers that adopt SIVA tech to mutate themselves make up the new enemies of Rise of Iron. As my missions pit me against them for the first time, I have that satisfying thrill that Destiny has always provided when discovering a new foe's tactics. Splicer Dregs skitter into battle on new mechanical pegs, flinging out SIVA-powered grenades. When I pop one in the head for a precision kill, I'm alarmed that my punishment is a seeking ball of glowing red energy reflecting from the headless corpse. Vandals have gained a berserk ability, regenerating health when critically hurt and then relentlessly charging my location. Fallen shock rifles no longer seek, but come blazing in at higher speed. Sniper wire rifles now target me with a devastating triple tap blast that decimates my shields. Servitors have a wholly redesigned aesthetic, wrapped in SIVA tech that makes them appear angular. Even the Fallen Walker Tank has seen a retrofit; the new Perfected Walker glows with red energy as it blasts out seeking cannon shots and summons additional SIVA clusters to litter the ground. My first encounter with one is a frenzied fight, which I only win thanks to the new relic shock cannons I pick up nearby.

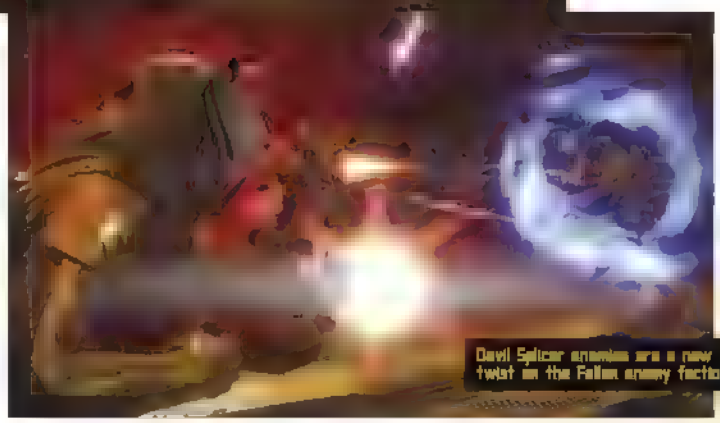
The Splicers don't offer the same dramatic departure from form that defined the Taken's appearance in the last expansion. But even if many of their attacks are only modifications from existing Fallen dynamics, the battles I fight against them are pitched and challenging.

BEYOND THE CAMPAIGN

My journey through the Plaguelands isn't just about new story missions. This is also a new high-level patrol zone, which serves as the battleground I return to as I try to complete heroic feats and earn access to one of the Iron Lords' artifacts (see page 46). Along with the familiar patrol missions, a new Quarantine mission demands that I track down a Splicer Machine Priest and halt his dark ritual before it spreads. Killing him leads to an onslaught of angry Splicers. My fireteam and I survive thanks to the handy appearance of the new flaming axe relic. The powerful melee armament recharges ammo with light attacks, and drains ammo quickly when I unleash a devastating fiery wave with a heavy attack. When I keep its ammo above a certain threshold, it inflicts double damage, and does a handy job of finishing off the swarming Splicer assault.

Delve deeper into the Fallen fort at the heart of the Plaguelands and I encounter one of Rise of Iron's biggest surprises – the Archon's Forge. This new Thunderdome-esque battle arena is a twist on Destiny's wave-based modes. Conceptually, Archon's Forge sits in a space squarely between the single-target brief encounters of the Court of Oryx and the much lengthier multi-stage Prison of Elders. "Archon's Forge is this replayable activity that you can access after you've beaten the story," Taylor says. "We like the idea of a player grabbing a group, initiating an encounter, and going to do this together." The player-triggered sequence allows fireteam members to work together with other random players, confronting a five-minute, wave-based encounter. Fallen enemies spawn out of domes that crack open

The Archon's Forge is a cooperative arena that features exclusive rewards



Devil Splicer enemies are a new twist on the Fallen enemy faction

across the arena, and the battle culminates in a boss that can be defeated for Forge-exclusive loot. To trigger an encounter, you need to find SIVA offerings throughout the Plaguelands. Each leads to different tiers of difficulty.

Rise of Iron's five-mission opening campaign is capped with a particularly memorable final battle, but it doesn't take a tremendous time investment to complete. Borrowing from the structure of The Taken King, completion of Rise of Iron's campaign opens the door to other endgame activities, including new exotic quests, the pursuit of art fact acquisitions, and a questline that leads to a brand-new strike. The Wretched Eye strike sends my fireteam deep into decayed missile silos within the Plaguelands to confront the Splicers as they attempt to subvert and infect a Hive nest with SIVA. More than ever before, this new strike explores variant paths, as each playthrough opens different doors through the silos, and varied enemies to overcome. Its concluding fight seems inspired by the classic monster story *Frankenstein*.

Beyond that new dungeon crawl, Bungie refreshed two other familiar strikes to tie into the SIVA threat. The Devil's Lair transforms into a fight against Sepiks Perfected, and includes new Splicer enemies and also an entirely new story thread and dialogue. The same is true as we return to the moon, where The Summoning Pits has become the Abomination Heist – a far more threatening encounter than its original incarnation.

No matter which strikes you encounter, Bungie's new reward system should come as welcome news to players hunting after particular strike-unique rewards. Confront strike playlists and nightfalls, and you sometimes receive a skeleton key upon mission completion. These can be used to open a chest called a Strike Hoard that spawns at the conclusion of any strike, including strikes you've designated to tackle individually outside of the playlist. Those hoards are guaranteed to supply one of the strike uniques for that location. This structure should make it easier to gather a key, and then enter the strike that features your desired item, where you can be much more certain of a drop.

While strike playlists and arena fights play big roles in the expansion's PvE endgame, they are not the only components. When Bungie first announced Rise of Iron, fans were most excited about the unveiling of a new raid. Destiny's six-person cooperative raids set the game apart, and demand a level of teamwork and precision uncommon in most other PvE shooters. Raids are one of the tightest kept secrets of an expansion, and for good reason. The early days after a raid's release are filled with ambitious groups aiming to figure out its secrets. As such, I won't spoil anything about the individual encounters that make up the new raid, Wrath of the Machine. However, what I played suggests that players are in for some big surprises. "The raid is a continuation of the main story, but it is specifically about SIVA and the devil splicers," Barrett says. "We wanted to give the raid its own unique arc."

Wrath of the Machine is action-packed, focuses on constant mobility, and features a particular set-piece encounter that is one of my favorite sequences in the Destiny game to date, highlighting a massive steamroller of a threat. Featuring numerous outdoor locales and peppered with memorable boss fights, Wrath of the Machine is worth getting excited about for when it releases on September 23, just a few days after the expansion's launch. Its designers cite "collision" as a chief theme, and you'll understand why once you face its blistering challenges.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

Artifacts of the Iron Lords

Artifacts were introduced to the game last year as another way to customize your Guardian, but the implementation fell short of the mark. Many players complained that artifacts did little to justify their existence, and the stat boosts provided could have been easily rolled into other gear.

Jump ahead to Rise of Iron, and the artifact slot on your character sheet enacts one of the biggest shifts in gameplay, acting as a prime example of how Rise of Iron increases playstyle choice.

Eight new class-agnostic artifacts take center stage. While each one still provides some minor perks and significant stat boosts, each also bestows a game-changing power on your Guardian. These powers are independent of any single subclass or exotic equipment perk, but they're also built to allow endless experimentation in combination with other aspects of your build. "The goal for us was to add a new element to the sandbox, to players' abilities, that they could then mix and match to create different loadouts," says game director Christopher Barrett. "On top of that, we thought it would be cool to have multiple ones, and this experience of collecting them all. By the end, you have this new thing in your toolbox – eight unique abilities that you can pair with any of your characters."

Every one of these new artifacts ties its gameplay modifier to the lore of the character for which it is named. "Anytime you can take an item from the game and wrap it within the fiction, it makes it more meaningful and more part of the world," Barrett continues. "We wanted the artifacts to support understanding the different Iron Lords."

To obtain one of these new artifacts, you tackle a new set of missions from the archivist of Felwinter Peak, Tyra Karn. These weekly bounties encourage engagement with enemies in the new Plaguelands locale, and many activities in that zone help to fulfill your objectives. Complete this weekly task and you're provided with a single token called the Iron Lords' Legacy, which in turn can be used to buy one of the three artifacts Tyra has for sale that week. Eventually, all eight dead Iron Lords will enter their designated artifacts into circulation. The artifact comes to your Guardian's hand depowered, and you must take it before the statue in the nearby mausoleum, lighting a brazier before your chosen warrior to instill that legendary Guardian's power into the item.

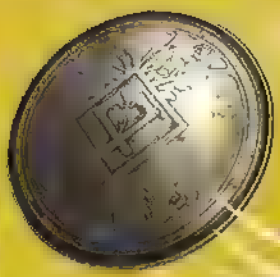
After eight or more weeks, depending on your devotion to the task, your Guardian will have lit all eight fires, and you will have eight dramatic new modifiers to introduce into your battles.

Memory of Radegast

Described as the first among equals, Radegast the Titan was the King Arthur of the group, and strode into battle with a mighty sword in hand. His artifact adds a new ability for sword heavy weapons, letting you reflect energy-based projectiles, including everything from an ogre's blasts to a Crucible opponent's rocket.

Memory of Perun

The field commander of the Iron Lords was a consummate strategist, and her situational awareness went beyond even fellow Hunters. If you bear her artifact into battle then enemy Guardians with full supers are highlighted yellow, and all enemies with low health are highlighted red for easy targeting.



Memory of Jolder

A particularly close companion of Saladin, Jolder was a mighty Titan champion who ran bravely into battle without a thought for her own safety. Her artifact bears an ability that many players have longed for since the game's launch – the ability to completely eliminate sprint cooldown, allowing your guardian to ceaselessly charge ahead.

Memory of Stilmar

Stilmar was proud, wrathful, and brilliant, and the architect of the Iron Temple that sits atop Felwinter Peak. He was a defense-oriented Titan, always looking for a way to offer better protection. As such, his artifact provides a unique ward – the ability to dramatically reduce any damage inflicted through damage-over-time (DoT) effects. It should be a welcome deterrence, especially since the infamous Thorn hand cannon is returning in Year Three.

Memory of Felwinter

The great enigma of the Iron Lords, Felwinter was an Iron Lord with good intentions, but sometimes questionable and unusual ways of interacting with the Light. The warlock discovered the mountaintop retreat that would become the Iron Lord's home. His artifact offers the most dramatic gameplay modifier – lose your super, but gain an extra grenade and melee charge, a boost to all your stats, and orbs recharge your grenade and melee abilities.

Memory of Gheleon

The Hunter named Gheleon may have been a sullen pessimist, but few doubted his assessments of the situation on the ground – no matter how dire. Guardians that wield his artifact gain detailed radar at all times, and radar persists when aiming primary weapons.

Memory of Skorri

If Radegast echoes the legends of Arthur, then Skorri is Merlin. This legendary battle bard and warlock inspired her allies with songs and wisdom. Guardians who follow in her footsteps use her artifact to glow with an inspiring light that speeds up super recharge for all nearby allies.

Memory of Timur

Creepy and misunderstood, Timur's Warlock powers and demeanor almost recall those of a controlling necromancer. Guardians willing to flirt with shadow can take up Timur's artifact, and transform their melee attack, giving it a chance to turn low-power minions of Darkness into allies. These enemy creatures fight at your side, turning their weapons on confused fellow aliens. Another melee a few seconds later puts them back in their right mind, or the effect expires after 30 seconds.

The Survivors?

Only the eight Iron Lords who felt when sealing away SIVA have their own named artifacts, but canny players know that two more heroes once stood at their side. Saladin is the most familiar, he has hosted the Iron Banner to hone the Light of newer Guardians and prepare them for the threat of SIVA's reemergence. But the sniper named Efrideet also may have survived, as she has no statue in the Mausoleum. Bungie won't be waiting long before exploring the mystery of her disappearance.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45

GEARING UP

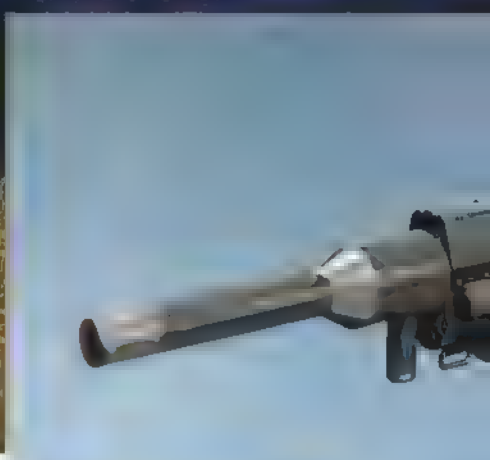
Whether you're preparing for a raid run or you just love the climb up the leveling ladder, Rise of Iron is built to supply many hours of new progression and looting. Keeping with the thread running throughout this expansion, the new investment opportunities focus on player choice, in both the way you play and the way your Guardian looks.

September's expansion sees Guardian levels still capped at 40, but Bungie has raised the light value to 385. During my days playing through the content, I saw the same gear-acquisition system in play that has been governing advancement for months now. When determining drops, the game aims to improve on your current light by small increments. New rare blue weapons and armor (and an occasional lucky legendary purple) helped me inch up from my existing 335 into the low 350s. Unlike last year, it was easy to bring my favorite equipment along for the ride. April's one-for-one infusion system remains in place, and Year Two weapons and armor can seamlessly transition into Rise of Iron. "Anything that has been released since The Taken King can be infused to the new light values," Taylor reassures me. In keeping with the previous successful approach, your light value can jump again when the hard-mode raid releases some weeks after the expansion's launch, boosting your potential up to 400.

Those numbers likely don't mean much to fledgling players, but the system is supremely friendly to newcomers. Whether you choose to play now or at Rise of Iron's launch, all the high-level gear you acquire has value and carryover potential. Favored items can easily be improved by sacrificing higher-powered but less-desired options. Additionally, Bungie once again plans to offer a character boost option. While the exact light value is yet to be determined, those playing Destiny for the first time in September should be able to easily join up with friends who have been playing for months or years. Moreover, you can look forward to exploring the entirety of the Destiny 1 journey in advance of next year's sequel.

Veteran players know that light increase is only one small part of Destiny's progression. Acknowledging that the new gear needs to compete with all the cool options from Year Two, Bungie is working to make those rewards look and play in fun ways. Several new armor sets are on the way, including full collections from Archon's Forge, Iron Banner, the Wrath of the Machine raid, and the Iron Lords.

With Rise of Iron's release, PvE content from The Taken King goes live to all Destiny players.



The new Hawkmoon exotic has more customization options than any weapon in the game.

That final group, the Iron Lords armor, is acquired through the new Rise of Iron Record Book. This embedded progression tracker echoes what Bungie presented with the Sparrow Racing League event, and the recent Moments of Triumph for Year Two. Put simply, every possible activity in Rise of Iron helps to contribute progress to the book.

At designated percentage-completion points, you acquire a new reward, including the full Iron Lords armor set, multiple emblems, a shader, the new Iron Song ghost shell, and more. "As you play through the story, and as you complete certain parts of Rise of Iron, you can very easily see what rewards are awaiting you," Barrett says. "On top of that, we wanted to give the players a whole bunch of stuff to do. We wanted to put those things right in front of a player."

"The Record Book is account based," Taylor adds. "If you decide you want to do one piece as a hunter, and another as a warlock, you don't have to worry about missing something – it's however you want to play." Complete a task with one character, and you get the designated reward for all your classes.

We can also look forward to themed armor and weapons sets for factions, including Dead Orbit, New Monarchy, Future War Cult, Vanguard, and Crucible. While I didn't get to see full collections during my visit, Bungie tells me that these matching sets are meant to allow for comprehensive faction representation as never before. Armor sets provide a more unified appearance, and you can even acquire themed faction ghost shells and sparrows to go along with your armor and weapons.

To further support customization, every class item that has ever shown up in Destiny is returning to circulation, with the exception of items from previous raids. Class items once again color-match with your chosen shader. Those cloaks, bonds, and marks add yet another way to set your hero apart.

Beyond returning elements, visual customization of your Guardian also has a brand new component that Bungie is tentatively titling ornamentation. Ornaments are meant to offer expanded ways to set your Guardian apart, and they affect several of the new legendary armor sets, as well as exotic weapons. "We introduced chroma in April, but it was only about illumination," Barrett says. "We wanted to evolve that system into something that allowed not just color changes, but to have geometry changes as well. For instance, you may end up having huge new pauldrons, or a fur trim."

Ornaments don't change the functional options of an item, but instead layer on a new skin that changes its appearance in both subtle and dramatic ways. These prestige options are applied to items one at a time, and during my experiments, I could change them back and forth at will. Already-imposing raid armor suddenly gains new light and color effects. Cherished exotics like Invective or Monte Carlo have new colors and visual effects. One weapon I saw visually transformed from its normal appearance into an ultra-sleek Golden Age form, reminiscent of the popular Sleeper Simulant weapon

Crests dropped in Supremacy look different based on your class

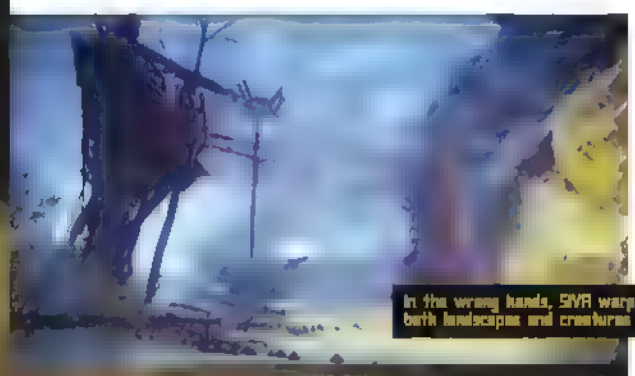
Many of the new armor pieces recall medieval and Viking apparel

Like the recent introduction of chroma, ornaments provide another rabbit to chase in the name of shaping your Guardian's persona. Many of the armor ornament sets are only rewarded through top-tier play. For instance, only flawless Trials runs provide the ornaments necessary to tweak your Trials armor pieces. Other ornaments, including some of the exotic weapon ornaments and the Iron Lords armor set, are dropped from radiant treasures. Like sterling treasures before them, these packs can be obtained both through designated in-game activities or microtransaction purchases.

Like many players, a big part of my long-term engagement with Destiny comes through the chase after new exotics. I only glimpsed a few of the new arrivals, but rest assured, Rise of Iron has a host of new golden items to pursue. Some have been rumored for a long time, and others feature names I'd never heard before. These include the long-awaited arrival of Warlock exotic boots (finally!), a new sidearm reminiscent of the classic *RoboCop* gun, and a SIVA-themed pulse rifle that blossoms out a cloud of seeking energy from a successful precision kill. I'm eager to obtain each for my Guardian at home. Bungie is also bringing back familiar favorites like Gjallarhorn and Thorn, both of which have new questlines built in for acquisition.

Many of the details of these exotics are still being tweaked, but Bungie confirmed one particularly exciting addition: The Khvostov 7G-0X. The new exotic auto rifle should be familiar to every single Destiny player, at least if you have a good memory; it is a dramatically upgraded version of the very first weapon you obtain in the game. The new Khvostov has no single exotic perk that sets it apart. Instead, its exotic status comes from the multitude of different firing options it can adopt. While ostensibly an auto rifle, its first perk column allows for auto, burst, or semi-automatic fire, effectively allowing it to control like almost any primary weapon. Each of the other perk columns also presents multiple options, including a column that selects a 450 or 900 RPM option, for medium or high rate of fire. Do the math, and there are more than 100 combinations to try on this single gun, inviting endless experimentation. I used the Khvostov for hours, and was constantly tweaking to find the perfect build. The gun is acquired through a determinative and clear quest that opens up after the main story missions, ensuring that any and all Guardians can have the chance to try it out. It's just one more reminder of Bungie's focus on choice and varied play style as the heart of Year Three Destiny adventures.

SIVA mutates the Fallen, often providing dramatic visual alteration



In the wrong hands, SIVA warps both landscapes and creatures

Iron Banner tournaments no longer demand specific gear to maximize XP

THE FUTURE OF DESTINY

Bungie has often been reticent to speak about Destiny beyond its most imminent release, but the studio increasingly recognizes player desire for a longer view. I chatted with Bungie's new CEO, Pete Parsons and live team director, Jerry Hook, about the ways Destiny aims to learn from its first two years and better prepare for what's to come.

"The community played the game a lot more than we thought," Parsons says. "It was a little overwhelming in some ways. We definitely had a tiger by the tail. We realized that we were going to have to support that, and feed it, and learn how to talk to our community. We had to really understand what we had created."

It's a good problem to have, but one that led to endless frustrations from the community in the early months of the game, who often felt starved for new opportunities to engage. Bungie learned that many of the concerns voiced from the player base went beyond those of the team's previous games, and demanded a new mindset. "When people are complaining, you can have this reaction where you say, 'look at how many hours you've already played, how can you complain?' And that's wrong thinking," Parsons says. "Because these people have invested 800 hours in your game, or more. We have a duty to continue to provide this great world that people can engage in and have fun with."

Part of the answer to the problem came through the launch of Destiny's live team, an entity specifically built around long-term engagement. "When I was brought on board, and we pretty much started the live team, I had a nucleus of six people," says live team director Jerry Hook. "It was literally talking about how do we want to support this hobby for the players that we have?"

As that live team grew, one big takeaway was the community's hunger for narrative. "The thing a lot of players have been asking for is give us more of the story," Hook says. "Give us more of the background, give us more of these characters we've come to love, like Lord Saladin. What the heck is he doing in the tower once a month? What's he doing with the rest of his time? Where are the Iron Lords? To me, those kinds of questions are fundamental."

Bungie also shifted gears in its approach to updates, dramatically increasing the pace of game elements like class and weapon rebalances, mission and map tweaks, and more. "A hard skill we've learned is how to be more nimble and agile," Parsons says. "Just in the number of updates we've done since launch – it's 40-plus! I think our pre-Destiny days were relatively nimble, but maybe that just prepared us for what we really needed to do now."

Communication remains a sticking point for the community, where there's a potent desire to stay up to date on what's coming next. Parsons recognizes the frustration, and seems to share the sentiment. "I'd love to be able to publish what we're doing for Destiny for the next two years," Parsons says. "I think internally that's a goal that we have. We were playing catch up so much on just figuring out what we had made and how we were going to support it, and what tweaks we needed to make. We're getting ourselves in a position where we can start doing that."

So what is on the docket? While no one was quite ready to share two-year plans, the live team sees Rise of Iron's release as a first step in marching orders for Year Three, and the team is confident enough in what's coming to share some insight, starting with an October release. "You are going to have a new Festival of the Lost coming, and we'll have brand new quests and new masks for you to chase," Hook says.

Beyond that, a December update is planned, and it will include the Sparrow Racing League, but also broaden beyond that activity. "When we talk about SRL coming back, it'll probably be wrapped in a different style, not just focused around SRL," Hook says. "Because some of the stuff that we learned from our players around the Sparrow Racing League is that some people didn't like racing. So, can you do something with the event that helps support those players a little bit differently? Absolutely."

For those that do like high-speed thrills, Bungie is hard at work. "There will be some new maps there for you and some more finishing touches on old maps, as we learned through the first season what worked and what didn't work," Hook says. Without offering specifics, Hook pointed me in the direction of Rise of Iron's new game zones for inspiration, leading me to visions of snowy mountain trails and SIVA-invested lava pits.

Even with Bungie's openness to looking a few months past Rise of Iron, scant information has emerged regarding Destiny's next numbered instalment. Accounting for the extensive track record of updates and expansions that have characterized the original game, it's easy to predict some big changes in any project considered a true sequel.

Destiny 2 has been announced for 2017, and given Rise of Iron's significant scope here at the end of 2016, it's a safe bet to predict the full sequel release in the latter half of next year, even without confirmation from the developer. While Bungie has kept details close to the chest, we have a good idea of the leadership team behind the project. Luke Smith and Mark Noseworthy helmed the release of The Taken King, and as of this writing, their social-media profiles declare each as director and project lead on an unannounced game at Bungie.

In the meantime, Bungie remains focused on walking the razor's edge between responding to a ravenous community and inviting in the new players that are essential to the long-term health of any franchise. "As we cross over these years, there are a lot of people that are starting their Destiny experience for the first time every day," Parsons says. "It's incredible to watch. What's their experience? How do we make the game more approachable for them? How do we hold their hand, or even better, how do we get the community to hold their hand and bring them along? Like the whole Sherpa movement, which to me is so awesome. I think about those things a lot. We are learning."

COMPETITIVE STREAK

Beyond the story about following in the footsteps of the Iron Lords, many Guardians eventually find their way to the Crucible. With Rise of Iron, Bungie has big plans to broaden the already extensive PvP experience.

One of the most significant additions is the Supremacy game mode. Like many first-person shooters, the most popular of Destiny's competitive experiences – Control – mixes objective scoring with twitch skill. Supremacy aims for a similar hybrid approach, albeit with a different vibe.

On its surface, Supremacy is straightforward – kill enemies to make them drop a crest. Your team only scores if someone (you or a teammate) picks up that crest. Enemy team members can also pick up the crest to deny your score, but they won't gain any points themselves. The core action should feel familiar to shooter enthusiasts who have encountered modes like Call of Duty's Kill Confirmed.

Thanks to extremely short respawn times, the action is fast and intense, rewarding teams that stick together in clumps to protect each other and gather allied crests before the enemy team can snag them. That same clumping behavior can lead to dramatic turnarounds as supers trigger, at which time entire teams can fall in response to a smart Nova Bomb, Fist of Havoc, or Arc Blade.

"I really like that Supremacy changes the engagement ranges a lot," Barrett says. "If you do take someone out from a distance, you have to close in to get the score. There's a lot of fun back and forth. It takes the core Crucible combat, which is really fun, and adds this new dynamic."

Supremacy offers three variations. The standard mode is a 6v6 throwdown, and the nature of the experience should allow for any number of maps to successfully support play. Inferno Supremacy promises an extra layer of difficulty, removing motion tracking for a purer shooting challenge, but still keeps the focus on crest collection to gain points. Finally, the Free-For-All option drops the player count down to six and demands you gather crests on your own, even if that means stealing the crest from another player's kill.

Playing a new Destiny game mode against the Bungie developers who have been designing it for months is always a humbling experience, but any beatdowns I suffered weren't enough to dim my enthusiasm. Supremacy rewards aggressive and highly mobile play, and interesting strategies became apparent even in my first few games. Great sniper? Work with a teammate closer to the action who can pick up the crests from your kills. Not great on the sticks? Lurk near a big fight until its completion, then sweep in with high agility to snag enemy crests and deny score to the other team. Even sacrificial charges into danger might be worth it; if you pick up three enemy crests before the enemy team drops you, that's likely a net positive for your team, especially since the quick respawn will have you back in the act on within moments.

End-of-match scoring illustrates whatever way a player contributed by showing crest pick-ups, crest denials, kill credits (getting the kill that dropped a crest), along with a traditional kill/death ratio. "Supremacy offers lots of different ways to contribute," Taylor says. "I love any game type that allows different types of players to contribute, even if you're intimidated by shooting."

While Supremacy is planned for use on many of the older maps, the matches I played at Bungie all unfolded on one of the four newly introduced battlefields. Each of the new maps is roughly medium-sized compared to previous offerings, and should support any number of game types, from Control to Elimination.

The Last Exit map takes Guardians back to the Ishtar Sink on Venus, and into the environs of a ruined subway station

Year 2 gear carries over into Year 3, but the new armor and weapons are tempting

Skywire takes players to a facility on Mars that overlooks the Buried City

and its outdoor plaza, which falls off into the Venusian ocean. Tight train tubes and maintenance tunnels allow for sudden, close-range skirmishes, while the outdoor area is peppered with cover points for longer range engagements.

Floating Gardens is a Vex shrine on Venus where the mysterious aliens go to recycle themselves when a body is no longer fit for service. The strange milky substance inside of them flows like a waterfall from the shrine, even as Guardians fight to hold down a bridge that can dominate the shrine's interior.

Skyline is a map set on Mars – a receiving area for the Clovis Bray research facility, and a vista that looks out over the Buried City. An elevated rail car marks one end of the map, and the center is dominated by a massive floating hologram of Mars and the Traveler, which sheds light into the lobby.

Finally, this year's PlayStation exclusive map is Icarus, a solar-collection site on Mercury. The arena is the raised structure at the center of the much larger crater-like array. Its circular shape inevitably funnels into furious conflagrations at the center.

With Saladin and the Iron Lords at the center of this new expansion, you'd be right to suspect that Iron Banner figures prominently in the game throughout the coming months. The tournament is getting some changes, not the least of which is the promise that the first Iron Banner tournament will feature Supremacy as its designated mode. Given his starring role in the broader expansion, whether Saladin will still take a central role in the Iron Banner event remains unconfirmed by Bungie, but whoever is reading the show, we'll see a new area of Felwinter Peak open up just for that purpose.

Iron Banner bounties and progression are also getting overhauled. The Crucible team has heard complaints that reaching rank five could take too long, especially if your only time to play was at the beginning of the week. As such, the tempered buff is going away, which previously made it easier to progress the later in the week you played. Instead, reaching rank five takes less time in general, encouraging players to reach max rank early, and then continue to play for subsequent rewards.

The alt character rubber-banding effect for reputation remains, which means you should still have an easier time reaching max rank with your second or third Guardian. In keeping with the broader mandate to provide player choice, wearing Iron Banner class items, shaders, or emblems no longer affect your reputation gains; expect to see a lot more color variety during tournament week. Finally, Iron Banner bounties are being reworked, eliminating some of the frustrations (like the need to be top scorer) and changing the reward structure. Complete a bounty, and you immediately get an Iron Banner equipment or weapon reward. In every case, Bungie is targeting ways to make Iron Banner more accessible, but hopefully without losing the focus on high power and winning that is at the heart of the contest.

Bungie proclaims one more major change is coming to Crucible play when Rise of Iron launches, but the team's not quite ready to pull back the curtain. When pressed, the team expressed enthusiasm for the way the new feature can continue to evolve player expectations for Crucible play, but stopped short of providing details. "Rise of Iron includes the introduction of a long-awaited feature our community has been clamoring for," says crucible design lead Lars Bakken. Whatever is coming, Bungie has promised we won't have long to wait. We'll have an exclusive first look at what Bungie has in store as soon as they finalize and announce their plans. Check gameinformer.com on August 16 to get the complete rundown.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Destiny: Rise of Iron faces an interesting challenge. The last major Destiny expansion was roundly praised for its robust collection of content, its core gameplay additions through three new subclasses, and the way it reimagined many investment systems after a sometimes shaky first year. Rather than reinvent needlessly, this new instalment builds on the foundation laid down over recent years of experimentation. My time suggests that this is a major new addition to the Destiny canon, even if its scope isn't necessarily as sweeping as last year's September release.

Rise of Iron feels like a confident step forward for the Destiny universe, defined by the multitude of choices it offers to its players. After so many months of engagement, Bungie knows that many players look to Destiny as more than just another game, but rather as a hobby in its own right, and a community which many interact with on a daily basis. Alongside a rapidly clarifying roadmap for where the game goes even after the expansion launches, Rise of Iron's fiction echoes the story of Destiny's development: A heroic past that sets the stage for an adventurous future.

Want more in-depth coverage of Destiny: Rise of Iron? We have a full month of coverage planned, including videos of the new competitive maps and modes in action, a round-table interview with Destiny's storytellers, and insight into raid design from the developer. Check out gameinformer.com/riseofiron to stay up to date on the latest details.

Battlefield 1

A welcome return for proper destructibility

» **Platforms**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(64-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
October 21

One of the early first-person shooters to allow players to raze buildings with explosives, Battlefield developed a strong reputation for evolving battlegrounds. During the glory days of Battlefield: Bad Company 2, players could dynamically alter firefights by eliminating cover positions to expose the camping snipers, but over the course of the last few games, developer DICE moved away from wanton ruination in favor of more controlled micro-destruction and gimmicky "levelution" set pieces. We're happy to report that Battlefield 1 turns the wreckage back up again.

Playing several hours over the course of the recent closed alpha, the developer impressed by how much damage tank shells and weapon emplacements do to the various structures littered around the featured map set in the French countryside. Roofs collapse, walls crumble to the ground, and even stone windmills serving as sniper havens can be blown to bits.

Dynamic weather also plays a role in the shifting battlegrounds. When fog rolls in, it limits the effectiveness of tanks and snipers sitting on the periphery and picking away at capture points. The impaired visibility cuts down on the medium-ranged infantry battles as well; many soldiers can't be spotted until you are much closer than usual.

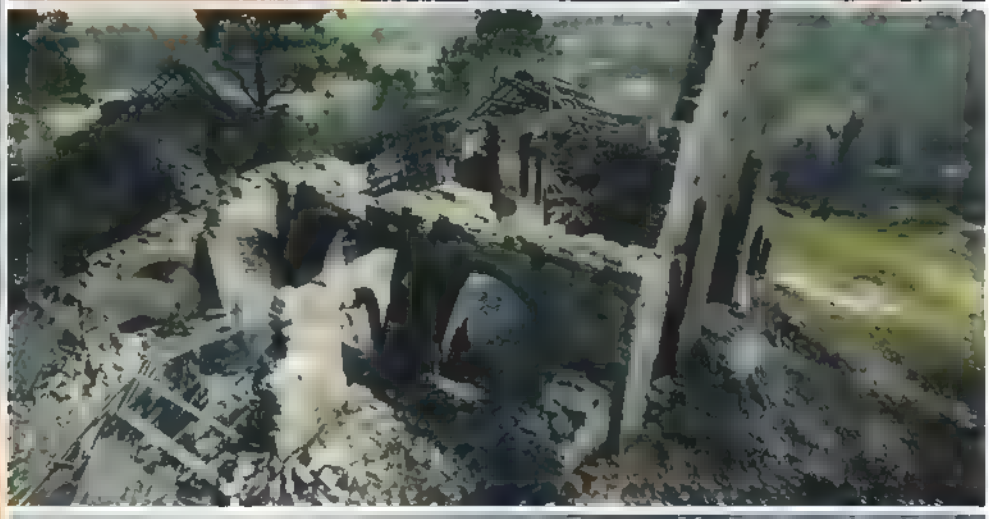
Coordinated play is a critical component to the Battlefield experience, so DICE is always analyzing how the different classes work in concert with each other. The World War I setting demanded the developer make some significant changes. Gone is the popular engineer class, which primarily focused on vehicle attacks and repairs. The anti-vehicle weapons are now a part of the assault class' repertoire.

The medic class is also changing in interesting ways. In addition to its tools for healing and reviving teammates, medics now wield the repair tools for vehicles and are armed with rifles more suited for medium-range gunfights. If you rush into an occupied building, you're better off charging with the bayonet melee attack than you are using your slow-firing rifle.

To encourage players to work together, DICE upped the value of following squad orders. Should you complete a directive from your squad leader in a timely fashion, the entire team receives generous point bonuses. Over the course of several dozen hours playing conquest, I rarely saw a lone wolf with a high kill count toward the top of the leaderboard; if they weren't earning team points they were typically in the middle of the scoring table.

One of the big new features DICE touted at E3 is the "behemoth," game-changing vehicle like a zeppelin, armored train, or battleship that

The amped up destructibility can turn windmills into piles of rubble, exposing sniping locations



Tanks can set up on the perimeter to lob shells at flag points when the weather is clear, but once the fog rolls in they need to move into the fray

are supposed to provide a boost to the losing team (at least in conquest mode). In practice, I rarely saw these vehicles do enough to turn the tide of battle. They serve as a great spawn point for quickly recapturing flags, but in my experience the losing team didn't get enough of a boost for them to make a difference. DICE says it's still tweaking the behemoths and listening to fan feedback, so perhaps their effectiveness will change in the final game.

I enjoyed my time with Battlefield 1's closed alpha. The reemphasis on destructibility and dynamic weather bring back some much-needed variables to the battles. That said, once the veneer of the World War I setting fades, it feels largely just like any other Battlefield game. Here's to hoping DICE has some more innovations up its sleeve to make this good franchise great again. » **Matt Bertz**

ReCore

Transforming a hostile world

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Comcept/
Armature Studio

» [redacted]
September 13

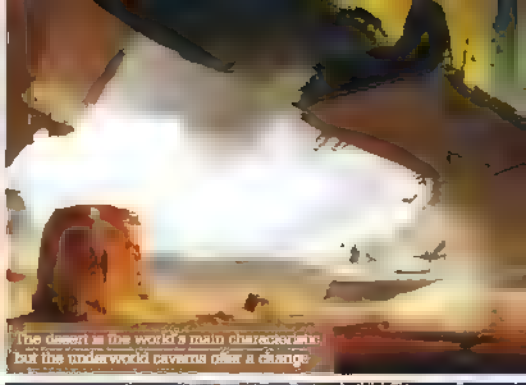
Mankind's desire to explore the universe is rooted in our curiosity. But in ReCore – the upcoming Microsoft title co-developed by Keiji Inafune's Comcept and Armature Studios (The Unfinished Swan) – that desire is born out of survival. Something happened to Earth that forces humans to seek out other worlds to terraform. However, not even the promise of new planets can deliver a rebirth.

ReCore's protagonist, Joule, wakes up from her cryo sleep to find that something has gone wrong. The hopefully named planet of New Eden, which was supposed to be terraformed and habitable at the start of ReCore, is instead a desert wasteland. Joule arrived as part of a larger team, but she is alone except for her companion robot, Mack. The rest of the robots transported to help with the terraforming process apparently ran amok, turning upon their human creators and becoming hostile. Their deep involvement in the development of New Eden means that significant parts of the planet are mechanized.

The world consists of two basic settings: the desert surface and the varied caverns below. While ReCore is not an open-world title per se, plenty of side areas can be explored for resources and collectibles. Joule wears a light exoskeleton that enables her to double jump and dash in order to navigate the world's platforming challenges. These moves didn't figure prominently into the hands-on time I had with the title, but Inafune (creator of Mega Man) stresses that platforming is a key part of the title. How well this aspect is executed is important to the game's success.

Joule's movements are so important to the title that director Mark Pacini at Armature says they prevent ReCore from using a traditional aiming system for combat. Her weapons have a reticle, but you don't move it independently via the right analog. Instead, ReCore auto-locks-on and switches targets based on Joule's movement. "ReCore isn't a game about aiming," he says, "It's a game about timing, movement, and position."

In practice I didn't find Joule's moves as specialized as Pacini suggests, but the targeting system wasn't hard to pick up, either. Occasionally,



I did have problems when enemies would attack on different vertical planes and the game would twitch between them momentarily as I moved around, making me wonder which one it would choose to target. Given Pacini's comments about Joule's movements in relation to the targeting, it will be interesting to see if her exoskeleton grants any new abilities (I played a section three hours in) that change up the interplay between the two gameplay systems.

Combat is based around different colors, requiring Joule to equip the correct weapon with the d-pad to match the color attacks of her enemies. Opponents with prismatic cores, therefore, require the player to switch weapons in order to blast through the enemy's various forms. The iron fang bot, for example, uses a red dash attack to create a blazing fire trail while also sweeping a blue beam across the screen. You can deal damage with any color or weapon you like, but you won't be nearly as effective.

Joule not only has her multi-colored weapons to fight off the revolting robots, but her trusty core bot helper Mack can dig up resource cores buried in the environment and perform a blue, lethal attack by pressing the Y button. Other core bots can be used for different purposes (and colors) such as climbing on walls as the game goes on, but clearly Joule and Mack have their own connection when the game begins.

Both Joule and her core bots upgrade as the game progresses, but the developers aren't divulging a lot of details about this just yet. Found resources will factor in, and players must make tough decisions with some enemies: Do you pull their power core out early or defeat them entirely? The former grants a handy resource, but if you do the latter you get loot.

Joule, Mack, and the rest of her core bots have a long journey ahead of them as they try to stabilize the planet and discover what exactly went wrong with the terraforming process. It remains to be seen how engaging the game's platforming is and how it meshes with players' exploration of the world, and how quickly they take to its non-traditional combat targeting.

▫ Matthew Kato

Halo Wars 2

Reinvigorating real-time strategy

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
343 Studios/
Creative Assembly

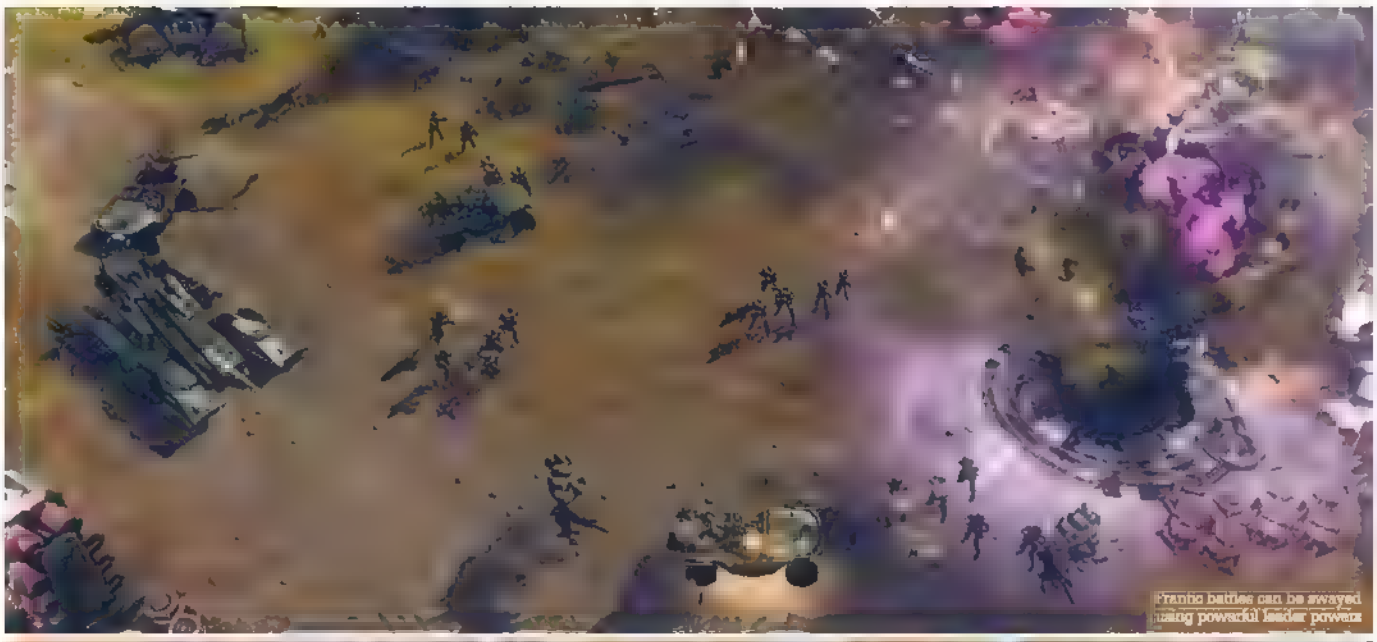
» **Release**
2016

The real-time strategy genre may have lost some of its thunder over the past decade to the rise of the multiplayer-online battle arena on PC, but console offerings in the space are few and far between. Halo Wars 2 seeks to reinvigorate the fervor behind tactical strategy, and bring the genre – which is often challenging to execute on consoles, with controllers as opposed to mouse and keyboards – back into the spotlight.

Halo Wars 2 takes place after the battles of Halo Wars and is positioned directly after the events of Halo 5: Guardians in the timeline. "Halo Wars did a good job of bringing real-time strategy to console. We're building on those foundations, with control system refinement and accessibility," says executive producer Graeme Jennings. "Focusing on taking accessibility and controls from the first game, and adding interesting battlefields from the Halo fiction." Halo Wars 2 features a full campaign in addition to its multiplayer components.

Halo Wars 2 aims to attract both competitive players familiar with RTS mechanics and more casual players just looking to dive in and have fun. A variety of maps and modes is the driving force behind this goal, giving players significant options in terms of what gameplay they want to interact with. In addition to standard gameplay modes that take around 20-25 minutes per game, Halo Wars 2 includes domination, stronghold, and blitz modes.

Traditional deathmatch has players managing a base and limited troops, incentivizing players to move out and take additional resources to fuel their armies. Domination mode hinges on capturing control points on the map and forces players to make decisions about whether to rush to take points for an early advantage or to hang back and build up before attempting to control the board. Stronghold mode gives players access to tons of resources and all the tech trees unlocked at the start of the game, meaning you can get right into all the action with no restrictions and your favorite units immediately available.



Frantic battles can be swayed using powerful leader powers

without the need to build up an economy. We don't know much about Blitz mode right now, but we're guessing it will be an even faster mode than Stronghold and the go-to option for players who have less time to complete a full game.

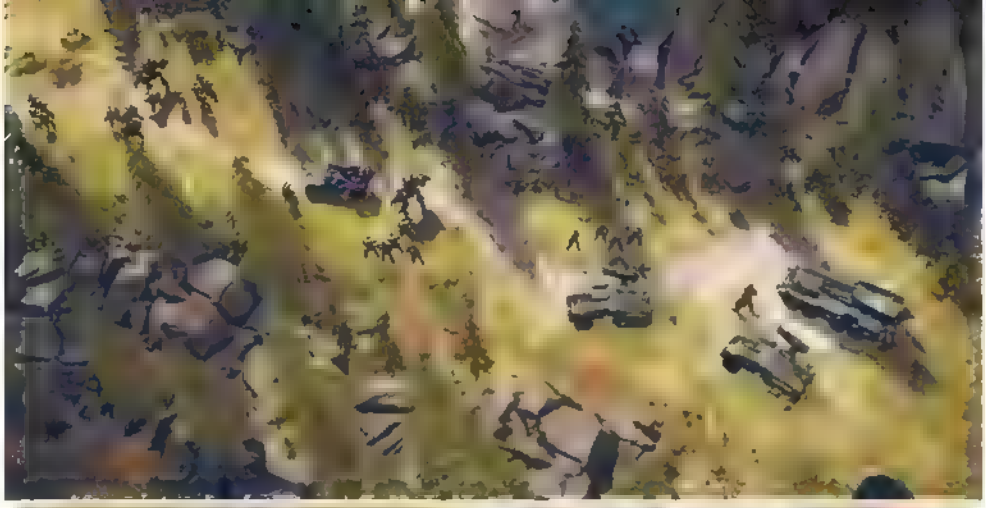
"Those who are scared by more hardcore concepts of RTS like tiers and base management, we want to show that it's not just like that, there are more accessible modes, modes for everyone," Jennings says. "There will be 10-15 minute games available alongside leaderboards, Xbox tournaments, and modes for players to play against the A.I. together."

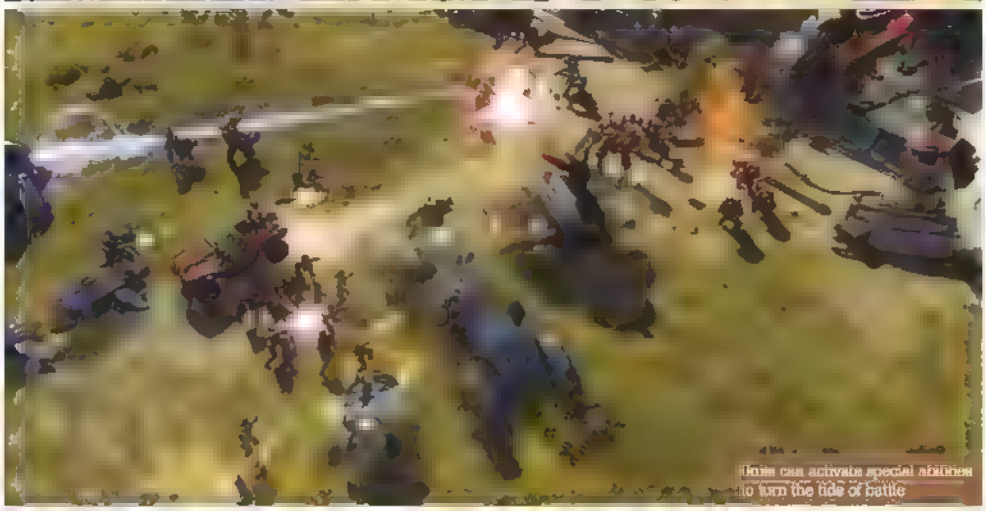
The two playable factions in the game are the United Nations Space Command (UNSC) and the Banished. Each faction has unique units and leaders that come with special powers. Leaders of the UNSC can execute special attacks like orbital blast strikes, marine drops, and other reinforcements. The Banished leadership can make units cost less, allowing them to build up a fighting force quickly. They also have access to deadly beam attacks.

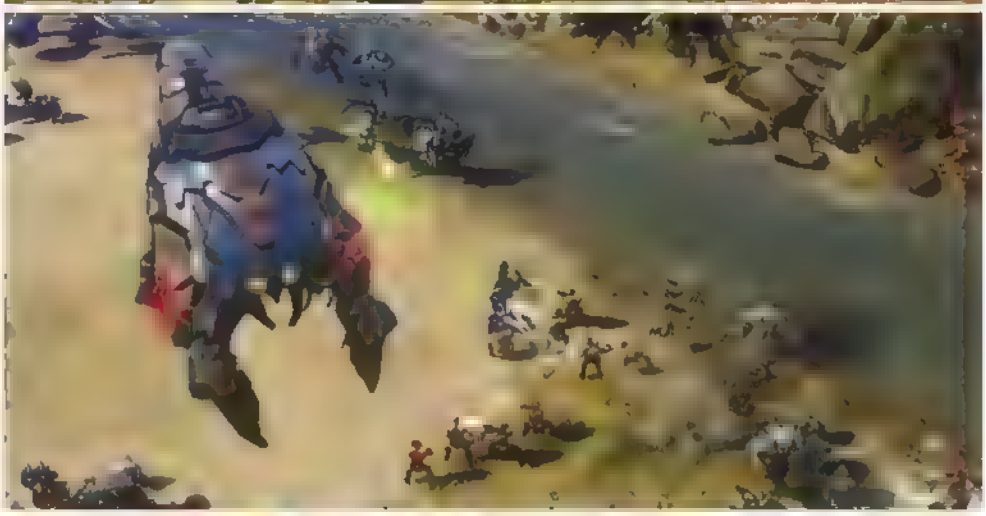
Players can combine units in creative ways to get an edge on the battlefield. For instance, the UNSC Kodiak siege unit has serious trouble at close range, but can unleash incredible damage from a good vantage point on an elevated position. To get the real value out of a unit like the Kodiak, pair it with a sniper, which can act as a spotter to ensure your heavy artillery hits the mark. Snipers can move invisibly when they're not shooting, so you can get them into the perfect position to set things up. On the Banished side, the sister unit to the Kodiak, the Busterback, can actually fly around, making it easy to prepare for bombardment from afar.

While units can upgrade and advance inside each individual game, Halo Wars 2 also features progression outside of matches for players. "We'll have various unlockables, competitive matchmaking, ranking, all those things," Jennings says. "There will be some sort of progression system at the account level." While you won't be able to play cross-platform from Xbox to PC, your achievements and profile and all those things will carry over should you decide to hop from platform to platform.

Pushing forward in the RTS genre is a daunting task in the video game world today. With Halo Wars 2 tackling console and PC markets simultaneously, we're sure to keep an eye on it in the leadup to its release. » **Daniel Tack**







Yooka-Laylee

A chameleon and bat pick up where bear and bird left off

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1 to 4–Player
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Team17

» **Developer**
Playtonic Games

[redacted]
2017

Banjo-Kazooie, the 1998 bear and bird 3D platformer, is held in high regard by fans of the genre. It represents developer Rare at its apex, delivering gameplay, worlds, and characters rivaling those of Nintendo's in terms of fun and charm. Rare has since moved on from the cartoon sh platformers of its N intendo 64 days, but a handful of its former employees did not. We spoke with developer Playtonic's studio head/creative lead Gavin Price, programmer Chris Sutherland (who provided the voice for both Banjo and Kazooie), and writer Andy Rob nson – all former Rare folks with ties to Banjo-Kazooie – about how a colorful throwback platfomer like Yooka-Laylee can exist in 2016.

Yooka-Laylee is the product of those former Rare employees' appreciation of Banjo-Kazooie, as well as the investment of about 73,000 fans The game was funded on Kickstarter in June of 2015 and was pitched as a "Rare-vival." It's an unapologetic Banjo-Kazooie spiritual successor, complete with a dual-protagonist, plenty of jumping, and lots of collectibles. "It's really important to us that we capture the 'look and feel' of that era, while continuing to innovate and bring core gameplay up to date," Price says. "We're evoking classic games with stuff like our old-school UI, which intentionally uses a lot of custom 2D sprites instead of 3D models, and the iconic 'gibberish' character voices, which our composer Grant Kirkhope and lead programmer Chris Sutherland have recreated after originally birthing them for Banjo-Kazooie."

The game stars a chameleon and a bat, Yooka and Laylee, respectively When Playtonic started to plan for the game, it tried out a few different combos before landing on this duo It tried a tiger, but felt it was too empowering. "We felt that animal didn't quite fit the 'underdog' archetype we were aiming for with our lead protagonist," Price says. The team even considered an insect as a partner, but decided on a chameleon and bat because of the myriad camouflage, sonar, and tongue abilities the two could use in tandem.

Yooka, the chameleon, can use his tongue to eat objects and absorb their properties, or use it as a grappling hook for platforming. Laylee, the bat, sits on Yooka's head and can pick him up for flight-assisted jumps, and use her sonar to stun enemies and smash objects.

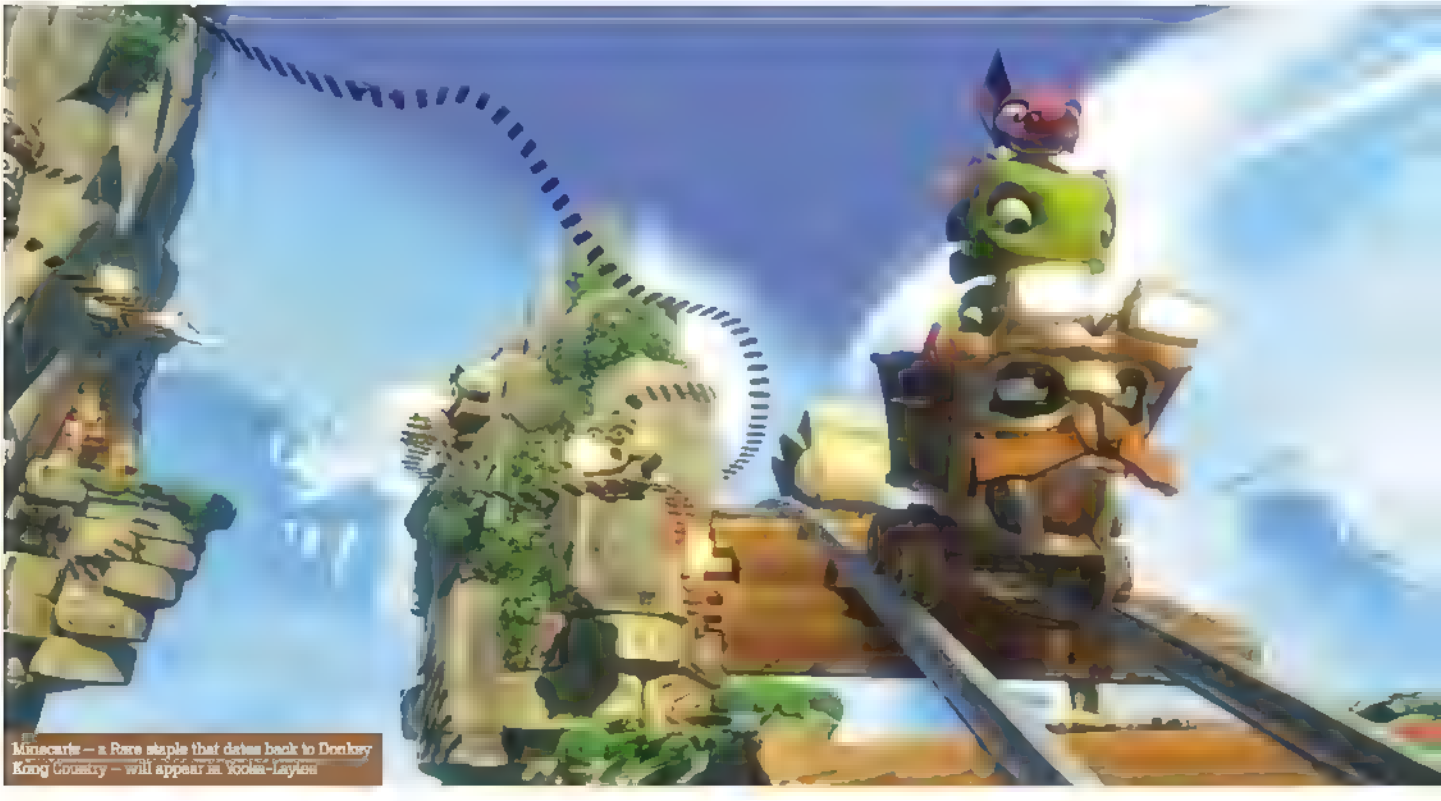
Crafting the controls was Playtonic's top priority, even before it settled on designs. "The very first thing we created was a controllable character – we did that even before we knew what the characters were, so we had no 3D models at all," Sutherland says. "We started with a cube, and made it move and jump around until it felt fun. We knew that if it felt fun to control a cube it would be even better when it came to controlling an adventuring duo."

Control in 3D platformers is one element of the genre that has aged well, but one glaring aspect of the genre has not: rampant item collecting. "We spent a lot of time thinking about collectibles and how we could capture the best bits of the so called, collectathon games of the past while avoiding their occasional bad bits," Sutherland says.

"With Yooka-Laylee we've deliberately put gameplay progression at the core of each collectible type," Price says. Butterfly energy, for example, can be simply picked up or eaten to either refill health or fill a power meter connected to a special move. "This allows us to create some really interesting platforming puzzles, while avoiding the tedium of having to juggle five different collectible types to power your moves," Price says. "We also employ the guy responsible for Donkey Kong 64's myriad collectibles, so we just used him as a barometer of what to avoid," he adds in jest.

Sutherland says modern platformers are linear, and he wants Yooka-Laylee to represent the more open worlds of the past, referencing Super Mario 64 and Banjo-Kazooie as examples. "We've put player choice at the core of Yooka-Laylee," he says, citing an ability to purchase new abilities in any order and expandable worlds. "It empowers players to explore environments at their own pace."

Kickstarter projects have had a few rocky releases, notably games like Mighty No. 9. Yooka-Laylee is in a similar boat as the Mega Man successor, as both feature the original creators of a beloved, but neglected franchise. When asked about avoiding Mighty No. 9's pitfalls, Playtonic made clear its priorities. "We've been focusing 100-percent on our own game development since our Kickstarter ended," Price says. "Our backers and fans have been really great to us and now we're determined to repay them with a great game. That's why we chose to delay our release by a few months. We could've hit the projected October release, but ultimately we wanted to spend more time polishing the game to deliver our fans the quality experience they expect." » **Kyle Hilliard**



Minecarts – a Rare staple that dates back to Donkey Kong Country – will appear in Yooka-Laylee

Steep

Gliding over all

» Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Sports

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Annecy

» Release
December

Ubisoft's surprise announcement during E3 was Steep, a game that taps into the extreme sports thrills of SSX and Tony Hawk to create a harrowing experience set in the alps. Here, players can participate in a variety of activities, including skiing, snowboarding, and soaring over mountaintops and villages with a wingsuit.

Steep is powered by the same engine behind Ghost Recon: Wildlands, and the large open spaces shown off in my hands-on demo are impressive to behold. Each session of the game begins with a view of the mountain that players are tackling. Steep also offers a variety of camera angles during the action, including an interesting first-person perspective that imitates the shaky cinematography of a GoPro camera, as well as the standard third-person perspective.

Like The Crew, Steep is an open-world game designed to give players choice when it comes to getting to the finishing line, letting them choose what sport they're going to be taking on each slope. You might choose to glide down one side with your wingsuit or snowboard instead. The environment is huge and snowy, filled with rocks and trees that are pleasing to look at, especially when the sun is shining down on them, though everything looks homogenous after a few minutes.

One of the key elements of Steep is its sharing focus, which allows players to blaze their own paths down the mountain as well as create videos from their adventures. The editing tools for these videos lets players use all of the game's perspectives and cut them together to create exciting footage and share it with the world. It's a nice concept that will likely encourage users to revisit the slopes over and over again in the hopes of cutting an impressive video that shows off their skills.

While Steep's ambitions in lifting a genre that hasn't been active in several years are admirable, we found the controls to be unwieldy and frustrating, especially with skiing and snowboarding, which require a level of precision that isn't there yet. Steep still has a few more months to go before launch, so these are issues that could be ironed out before its release. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Rock Band 4: Rivals

The music plays on

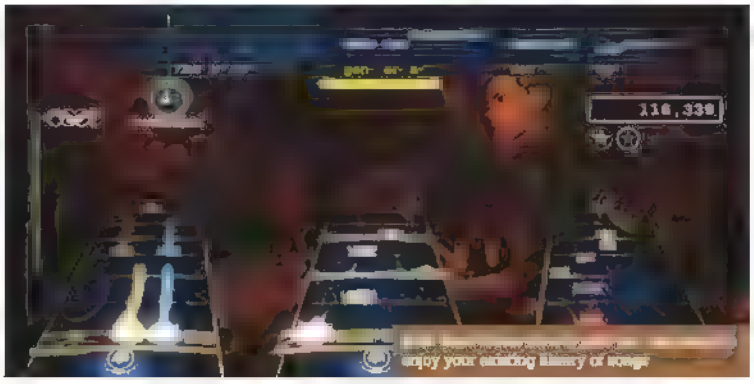
Last year saw the return of the Rock Band franchise with Rock Band 4, the series' first full-band game in more than five years. Since then, players have received free updates in the form of modes like the punishing Brutal Mode, but Rock Band Rivals continues the reunion tour into year two.

This new paid expansion adds two new modes to Rock Band 4 Rockudrama and Rivals. Each focuses on giving players new ways to interact with their existing music libraries.

With Rockudrama, players bring their band into an all-new campaign with the look and feel of a VH1 *Behind the Music* style documentary. The story chronicles your band's rise from playing virtually empty, run-down arcades to rocking sold-out arenas. As you progress, you view tongue-in-cheek live-action scenes of musicians discussing the influence your band had and reminiscing on the glory days with gameplay footage of your band interlaced.

In my time playing in Rockudrama mode, I formed The Last Kickboxers with a group of Harmonix team members. We chose our genre of music, which affects the narration of the cutscenes, and we set out on our first gig. After each song, dynamic narration praises the top performer and you're rewarded Fame points to help your band progress.

Despite us choosing our band's overall genre as metal, the song choices in the gigs span all categories and pull from your full library. This is great since it doesn't limit your song choices, but if your band doesn't stick to its chosen genre it is a little jarring to hear musicians talk about how aggressive and heavy your band's sound was during your first gig, then cut to you playing the laid-back "Short Skirt/Long Jacket" by Cake.



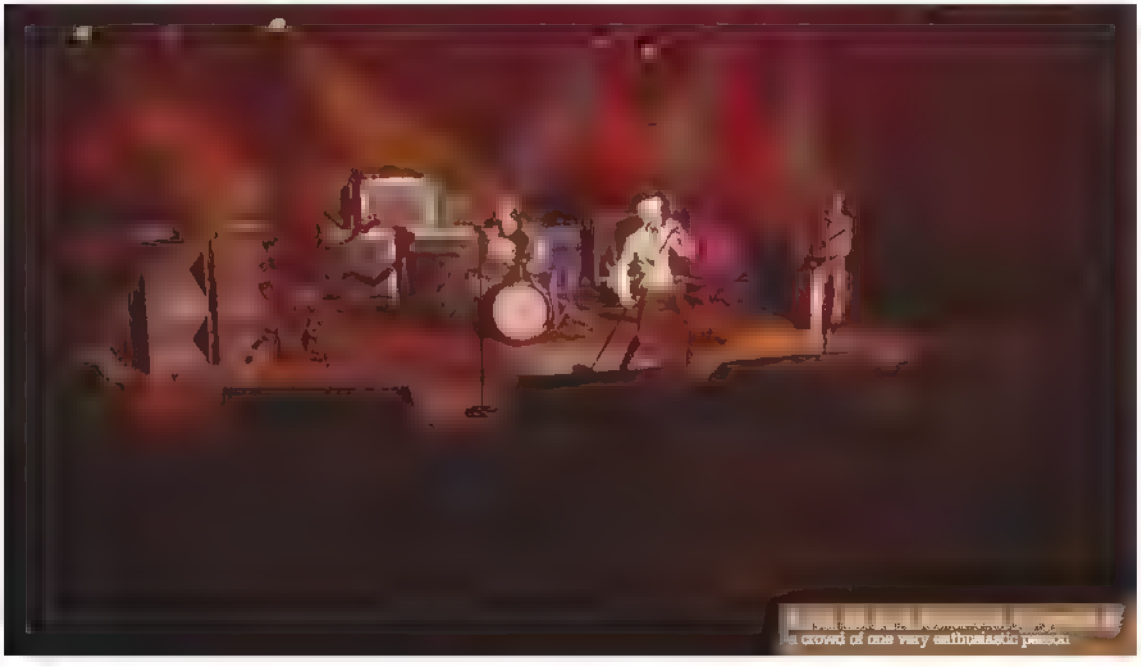
Enjoy your existing library of songs

The eponymous Rivals mode lets you join a group of like-minded players called a crew. With your crew of up to 10 people, you complete goals to earn rewards. The asynchronous nature of the mode means that players need not coordinate with the rest of the team to play at the same time.

Rivals mode is designed so that crews can be made up of all kinds of players; you can have your crew consist of all drummers, all expert players, or any combination. The goals are made to allow players of any skill level to contribute to goal progress, and while we won't know more until closer to launch, Rivals features some competitive aspect with other crews.

Earlier this year, Harmonix announced that Rock Band 4 is adding highly requested synchronous multiplayer modes through an update. That update is still scheduled for December, but only players who upgrade to Rivals can download it. The Rivals expansion also makes smaller changes to Rock Band 4, including new venues and a visual redesign of the front-end.

With the release of Rock Band Rivals, Harmonix hopes to continue innovating on the ways that it delivers the same style of gameplay to its fans. By providing a new infrastructure with which fans can access and enjoy their content in the Rockudrama, as well as a promising asynchronous multiplayer mode in Rivals, the team is giving its community incentive to dive back into Rock Band 4. » **Brian Shea**


A crowd of one very enthusiastic person

[redacted]
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Rhythm/Music

» **Publisher**
PDP, Harmonix

» **Developer**
Harmonix

[redacted]
October

What About New Songs?

Rock Band Rivals doesn't add any new songs to your library, but those who pre-order Rock Band Rivals receive a set of 10 free downloadable content songs. These songs will all eventually make their way to the standard DLC store, but those who pre-order the expansion will be the first to play the following 10 songs

- Bring Me The Horizon – "Happy Song"
- Capital Cities – "Safe and Sound"
- Eagle-Eye Cherry – "Save Tonight"
- The Neighbourhood – "Sweater Weather"
- Of Monsters and Men – "Little Talks"
- Pharrell Williams – "Happy"
- Semisonic – "Closing Time"
- Sia – "Chandelier"
- Skillet – "Feel Invincible"
- Weezer – "King of the World"

Vampyr

Dontnod introduces a bloodsucking dilemma

» PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Focus Home Interactive

» Developer
Dontnod Entertainment

» 2017

Dontnod has been exploring the gray areas in morality since its debut, Remember Me, but the choices in its upcoming game Vampyr are blood red. As Dr Jonathan Reid, you have to balance your professional obligations as a surgeon against your life-sucking impulses as a newly converted vampire. As with Life is Strange, the choices you make ripple out in unforeseen ways.

Game director Philippe Moreau walked me through one of the scenarios players encounter early on while roaming the streets of London. Reid witnesses an argument between two men, which leads to the older man pulling out a gun and firing at the younger man. He misses, fortunately, because he was drunk. Later, Reid can meet the two individually and learn what led to the conflict.

"Albert is a young thug who tries to impress members of a local gang by doing illegal stuff," Moreau says. In this case, he was told to steal the medicine from a man named Benjamin, the man with the gun. "Benjamin served during WW1 as a soldier and has post-traumatic stress disorder," Moreau says. "He tries to heal his pain with a mix of alcohol and drugs. That's why he went crazy when he knew that Albert stole his medicine."

Moreau says players who take the time to explore and engage both men in conversation can learn that there's something else going on in this situation. At that point, players (and Reid) have to make a potentially difficult choice: Which of the two men will Reid sacrifice so that he himself can live? "Depending on your choice, the life of the survivor will change forever," Moreau says.

Reid can still think rationally at this stage of his infection, but he knows that he'll eventually lose control of himself if the vampirism progresses. The city is filled with people who have suffered a similar fate, from vampires who still maintain a human facade to others who have progressed and mutated – thanks to the Spanish flu outbreak – into something primitive and horrible.

"As he considers vampirism a disease, he is convinced he can put an end to it," Moreau says. "He is now compelled to sacrifice human lives to survive long enough and eventually find a cure to heal himself. Of course, as a man of science and a humanist, this lust for blood forces him to act against his own principles."

Ultimately, the question that players have to grapple with is how far they're willing to go. Will you try to mitigate your bloody footprint, or fully give in to your basest impulses? We'll find out next year. ▪ **Jeff Cork**

Sea Of Thieves

Grog and slog on the high seas

The question "what happened?" is often asked when people discuss the current state of Rare, the UK based former hit maker that fell out of the spotlight after being acquired by Microsoft in 2002 for $375 million. Rare's biggest contributions under Microsoft's stewardship are small hits like Viva Piñata, a variety of games for the ill-fated Kinect device, and clothing for Xbox Live avatars. For a studio once revered for its triple-A products, Rare appears to be positioned as a studio specializing in smaller games or proof-of-concept projects for Microsoft's new technologies.

At last year's E3, Rare gave us a glimmer of hope that the company may be shifting back to large-scale titles with the announcement of Sea of Thieves. Although little of Sea of Thieves was shown, Rare hammered home the point that this quirky pirate adventure is the studio's most ambitious title to date.

A 20-minute demo may not be the best way to show off the ambition or scale of a project, but Sea of Thieves' gameplay debut at this year's E3 expo missed the mark. I played through the demo twice at Microsoft's booth, and didn't find the magic within it.

The most enjoyment I had with Sea of Thieves came early in my first play session. A group of four people are tasked to board a pirate ship. This may sound like a simple thing to do, but one of our pirate friends decided to guzzle down an entire pint of grog. He drunkenly swayed back and forth, and couldn't keep himself on the plank to board the vessel. He fell in the water and had to try again.

As I waited for him to do this, I pulled out an accordion and played a song. We all laughed at the silliness of the events at hand, and then the work and real gameplay began. For the ship to leave the dock, the anchor must be raised. To do this, a wheel on the deck is spun by the crew. The more people that push it, the faster the process.

Next up is dropping the sails, a simple task that lacks any form of entertainment. With our ship sailing toward deeper waters, I soaked in the atmosphere and gorgeous visuals of the surrounding islands and waters. But then I found myself standing there with no purpose. Only the helmsman (who is on the wheel) had active gameplay at this point. The rest of us drank grog and played songs on the accordion. I even climbed up in the crow's nest because I had nothing to do. The helmsman eventually ordered us to readjust our sails to get a back wind. He wanted to take us closer to a vessel on the horizon.

We dropped our anchor to make a hard turn, and then several of us mounted cannons and opened fire on the rival vessel. Retaliatory strikes came quickly, but the battle didn't last long. Both ships survived, and we were tasked to fix ours up by placing planks over the holes in the hull. We circled around for another attack, and while we landed more shots this time, ran into the same result. It was stalemate of a war. That's when the demo ended.

In my second demo, I took on the role of the helmsman. After going through the laborious task of getting the ship to sail again, I found I couldn't see much behind the wheel. The main mast was directly in front of me, obscuring my view. When the sails were dropped, I couldn't see anything. One of my crewmates asked, "Do you need me to raise the sail a little so you can see?" I said "yes," and the sails were raised a few feet to give me just a tiny viewing window. I could turn my head to see everything to the left or right, but from the first-person viewpoint, helmsmen need to rely on their crew to truly know what lies directly ahead. I listened to their directions, and we eventually battled another ship, which played out just like my experience from my first demo, only I was controlling the circling tactic.

Rare says the sailing aspect is just one of the key pillars of the game, and that players have far more to do together, but won't reveal specific details at this point. The sailing demo gives us a good look at the scale of the world and exaggerated take on pirate living, but it was also surprisingly slow and dull at times. » Andrew Reiner

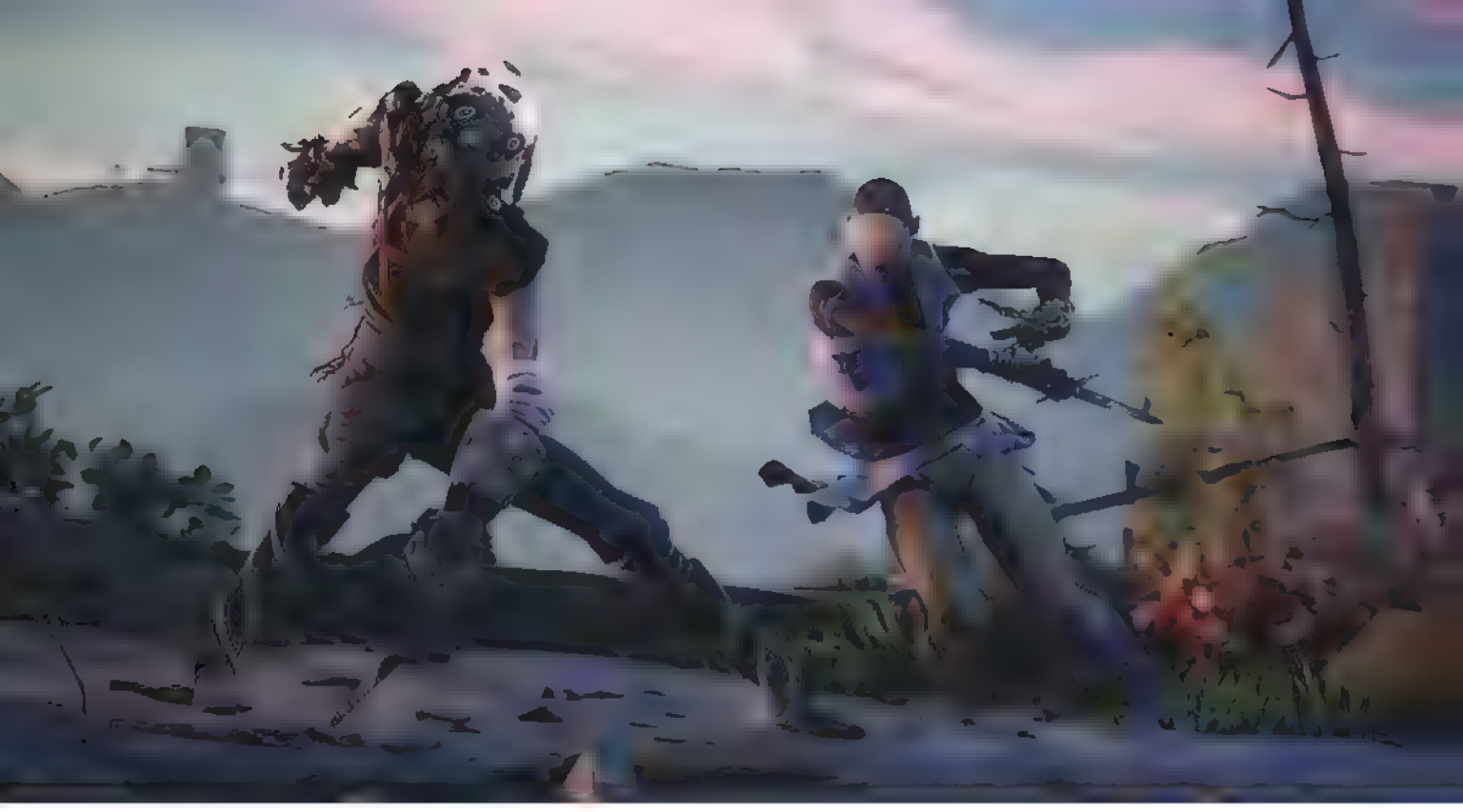
» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Action

» **Publisher**
Microsoft

» **Developer**
Rare

» [redacted]
20.7



Absolver

Everybody was kung fu fighting

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Devolver Digital

» **Developer**
Sloclap

» **Release**
2017

Absolver is a product of its time. Players are becoming more comfortable with complexity and challenge. They are willing to put in the time necessary to learn intricate systems. And there is a blue sea of opportunity for developers working on martial-arts games.

One of Absolver's inspirations seems to be BioWare's beloved action/RPG Jade Empire. Over the course of the game, players discover new styles and moves and configure their own attacks and counters based on four different stances that can be switched on the fly.

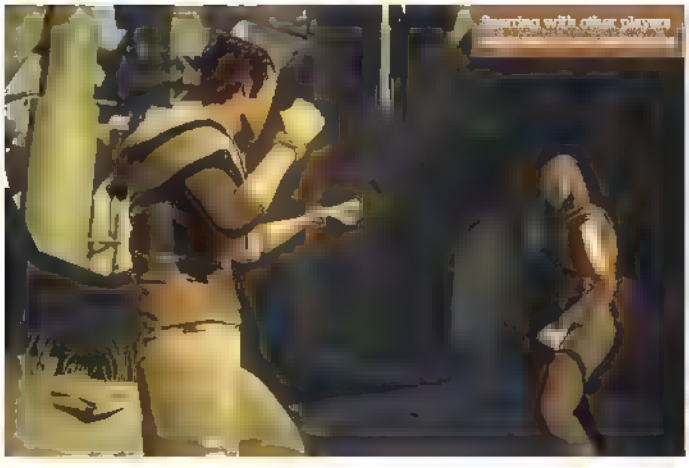
The backdrop for this combat system is a world full of intrigue. The Adal Empire has fallen, and is only held together by the rulers of the land called the Guides. Their elite troops, called Absolvers, are under the leading class' control via masks that the acolytes wear.

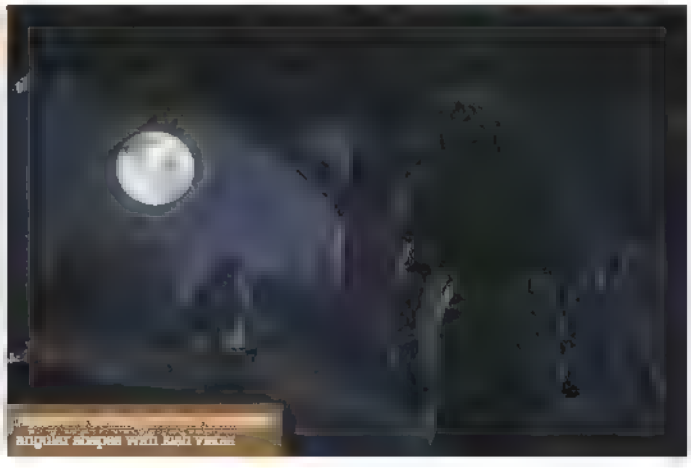
You begin the game by awakening in one of these masks but still in control of your free will. While you aren't under the Guild's thrall, you get the benefit of the mask's regenerative abilities. Should you die, you respawn at the nearest altar.

Based on my demo, it seems those are the best places to meet other players in the seamless shared world. Sparring near one means you can teach and learn moves alongside other players without having to trek back for another round.

Players can also team up for both player-vs-enemy and player-vs-player arena play. The former is set up in a dungeon format with rare loot as the prize. The latter is a test of skill in one-on-one or three-on-three matches.

Most of my demo was combat-based, so I don't yet have a strong sense of how the narrative complements the intricate battles. I'm looking forward to diving deeper into Absolver in the months to come. » **Michael Futter**





The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel II

Class is back in session

Last year the first entry of the Trails of Cold Steel trilogy debuted. The game introduced us to the intriguing Class VII of Thors Military Academy, allowing you to build friendships and take field trips to complete tasks and rid towns of baddies. It was a fun school simulation, but it also offered a challenging turn-based battle system that kept you thinking about every move. The game ended on a cliffhanger, and now Xseed is getting ready to launch the second game of the trilogy. Here's the lowdown on what we can expect.

For those who haven't played the first game, you should rectify that before stepping into this entry. Your save progress from the first game carries over, meaning those classmates you bonded with and NPCs you helped remember your heroics. Different cutscenes appear depending on who you cozied up to, and characters also reference past conversations. In addition, some faces who were merely side characters in the first game are now party members, such as protagonist Rean's sister Elise, mercenary Toval, and Alisa's maid Sharon.

The story picks up where the last game left off with Class VII split up, while Erebonia's civil war continues to heat up. "At the beginning of [this entry], they've been separated from one another but are doing what they can to reunite, all while working to become stronger and more capable for when that time comes," explains Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo.

Class VII aren't on board with the Noble Alliance or Imperial Army's views, so they've split off into their own third faction. "This allows them to fight for their own individual beliefs, so each character has something different at stake," says localization producer Brittany Avery. For instance, Rean's complicated friendship with Crow gets tested, while Jusis questions what it means to be noble. The game also sheds more light on mysterious party member Emma and her true duty, which often comes into conflict with her own happiness.

The combat also has some additions. An overdrive mode allows characters linked together to act uninterrupted for a set number of turns. It also comes with the handy perk of of fully restoring HP, EP for magic, and CP for specials along with clearing all status abnormalities. "It also makes their attacks able to unbalance enemies without fail, ignoring the usual weapon-type efficacy system," Kondo explains. This is sure to come in handy, as both Kondo and Avery say enemies are much tougher this time around, especially with the addition of Divine Knight battles, which are special battles against giant robots.

Trails of Cold Steel II appears to have all the makings that made the first game so fun and more. In addition, Rean faces off against one of the most powerful characters in the series to date: Enforcer No. I, McBurn. Things are bound to get complicated when he notices something about Rean that could mean big trouble for Class VII

» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» [redacted]
1-Player Role-Playing

» [redacted]
Xseed Games

» **Developer**
Nihon Falcom

» [redacted]
Fall

Livelock

A frenzied top-down future

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 3-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Perfect World

» **Developer**
Tuque

» **Release**
2016

Livelock distills the essence of the top-down twin-stick shooter into three character archetypes, sets them up with a variety of customization options, and tasks them with blasting through a futuristic world full of hordes of enemies and big boss battles. It's a little future-shooter, a little Diablo, a lot of top-down action, and a lot of intense, fast fun.

Players can select from only three different characters. Hex is the dedicated damage dealer, Vanguard is the front-line defense tank, and Catalyst is the support. While each class has abilities to help them complete their assigned task, they can be built out with many customization options to fit different play styles. Catalyst may have the best tools for support, but that doesn't mean she can't be built out to pack a serious punch in combat, especially utilizing drones and other special abilities.

Not only can each character's primary, secondary, and launcher weapons be slotted to meet your customization needs, but their abilities (MOBA style, with short cooldown standard abilities and an "ultimate") can also be selected before heading out into a mission. A team can have duplicate heroes or even opt to all play as the same character. Because of the variety of skills and abilities, there's little chance that everyone will have the same configuration, leading to a good mix of capabilities even if everyone decides to play the same core character.

Gameplay tasks players with moving through levels bristling with hundreds of foes, including randomized miniboss-style enemies that can spawn with different attributes and skills. Tons of loot is available to collect on the way, and players can spend some of the currency they find to upgrade, augment, and change out their available weapons and abilities.

Livelock can be played solo, but the heart of the gameplay is rooted in co-op teamplay, combining and coordinating characters, dodging deadly enemy abilities, and taking on the big bosses at the end of each level. Bosses often feature raid-style mechanics, weak points, and movesets and abilities that change over the course of a battle.

Leaderboards for both solo and co-op play challenge players to discover the best builds and strategies, while constant accumulation of resources and new options keep the gameplay loop compelling, mission after mission. With everything revolved and refined around the co-op balancing, surprisingly no player-vs-player options are available in Livelock – everything is about beating the high score. I'm interested to see how Livelock's team-based gameplay will shake out when it lands later this year. » **Daniel Tack**

Welkin Road

Mirror's Edge meets Spider-Man

At first glance, Welkin Road looks like a Mirror's Edge clone with simpler graphics and a few futuristic tweaks. You run, jump, and parkour your way through several stages in first-person view to reach an objective, but beyond that the similarities begin to fade.

Rather than building momentum as you wall-run and slide across one seamless set of obstacles, Welkin Road tasks you with figuring out how to progress through a series of disjointed platforms that make up one lengthy stage. While you can sometimes leap or wall-run from one platform to the next, the stages revolve around using dual energy beams that shoot out of your arms to swing across lines of floating orbs in a Spider-Man-like manner. It's easier said than done, however, as most of the orbs are arranged in ways that require you to approach each sequence like a puzzle.

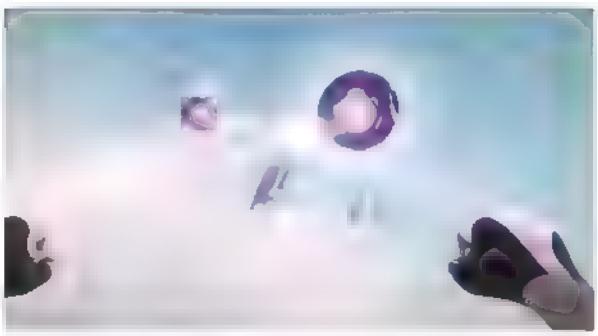
The grappling mechanics take time to master, but Welkin Road provides a stiff challenge even after you feel acclimated. The levels, which took me around 15 minutes each to complete, had me dying anywhere from 50 to 100 times on my first attempts. Though in some instances the beams weren't latching onto orbs as easily as I would have liked, the vast majority of deaths were my fault.

The swinging passages proved to be the most difficult part. From needing to effectively manage your momentum to make the jump to the next orb to having to approach orbs at just the right angle so you swing around corners and strategically placed obstacles, this early version of the game is full of intricate and challenging movement puzzles. The grappling became such a focus of the stages that the few moments where you perform more traditional parkour almost felt like a diversion rather than a piece of the overall puzzle.

Welkin Road has plenty of cool ideas at play, but I'd like to see some new things introduced to the formula. In addition to smoothing over the grappling mechanic, you should be able to mantle onto walls and obstacles. As of now, if you swing toward the top of a wall, you just fall with the character showing no effort to grab on. The game could benefit from interweaving the traditional parkour more into the main level design, as while those sections tend to be easier than the swinging puzzles, being able to expertly free-run through an area never ceases to feel awesome.

I will be keeping my eye on Welkin Road as it remains in Early Access. If the developer can refine the gameplay and deliver compelling stages, it could stand out as a first-person platformer that requires you to be as clever as you are precise. ▪ **Brian Shea**

- **Platform**
  PC
- **Style**
  1-Player Action
- **Publisher**
  Nkidu Games
- **Developer**
  Gregor Panič
- **Release**
  Early 2017



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Student work by: John Rogelas & George Stoll

F1 2016

Codemasters hopes to hit restart

Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1-Player Racing
(22-Player Online)

Publisher
Deep Silver

Developer
Codemasters
Birmingham

Release
August 19

Licenses can be powerful tools to get exposure and a measure of authenticity, but like anything else, they're only as good as the end product itself. Codemasters – a company that knows what it's doing when it comes to racing – has held the official F1 license for several years now. However, its stewardship of the F1 license is characterized by a fitful track record of games that range from good to poor, with no building of feature sets between them. Thankfully, F1 2016 appears to right the ship due to the return of a proper career mode. More than merely being included as a highlight mode on the back of the box, it sounds like a worthy endeavor.

The 10-year career mode contains the usual totems to customization (pick an avatar, number, and helmet design), progress (steer the direction of your team's R&D), and challenge (rivalries brew between teammates). These are welcome simply for the fact that F1 2015 didn't even have them, but they're not extraordinary in the larger context of other racing games.

What makes F1 2016's career mode noteworthy are the additional steps that Codemasters has taken to enhance these basics. The off-the-track world is fleshed out beyond just a few cutscenes and menus. You not only hire an agent and engineer with their own in-world avatars, but the paddock also has representations of real-world figures such as specific racing owners and F1 announcers.

Upgrades are a customary part of many racing titles, and the game not only makes a natural tie between your team's overall R&D direction and the tug-of-war between you and your teammate, but also between the team's upgrade path and the pre-race weekend that includes the normal practice and qualifying sessions. Players can execute tire/fuel management tests and track acclimatization programs (such as going through gates at the apex and exit of turns) to earn upgrade points to put toward different aspects of improving their cars and teams.

Rivalries come into play with your R&D program as the number one team driver gets the new tech first, even though you're always the one allocating the points. On-track rivalries are important as beating your teammate is the key to progressing in your career and satisfying the team and its sponsors. You also form rivalries with others on the track.

Strategy factors into race days as well. The inclusion of a safety car (both real and virtual) can change the field when the cautions come out, and manual pit stops mean you have to be precise in hitting the pit-road speed to avoid a penalty. The game also includes a manual start and a formation lap to warm up your tires before the start of the race.

I don't want to oversell the career mode changes as revolutionary, but given that they embolden the mode's basic structure and reinforce one another, it makes me hopeful that we're finally getting an experience that will not only be engaging for this game in particular, but which could be used as a foundation for future years. The series has dropped features before from one year to the next, so we'll have to wait and see.

» **Matthew Kato**

NHL 17

EA's puck franchise makes some offseason acquisitions

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(12-Player Online)

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Canada

Release
September 13

With the devaluation of the Canadian dollar, the NHL salary cap growth has stagnated, forcing franchises to shed payroll and make trades to give them room to improve their rosters. EA's on-ice product also doesn't have the financing to make transformative leaps, but NHL 17's buckshot approach to improvements across all the game modes has us hopeful it can contend with the better sports games nonetheless.

The best hockey league in the world is expanding with the addition of a Las Vegas franchise. Though the lack of an official team name and roster will likely prevent this new club's inclusion in NHL 17 this year, users nonetheless can inject hockey into Sin City and several other cities with the new team-relocation feature in franchise mode. Moving a club to Vegas, Hartford, Quebec City, or another of the 19 eligible cities gives users the chance to build a new arena from scratch.

Customizing your arena and team jerseys is also a centerpiece to the updated EASHL, the 6v6 online mode that experienced a rebirth last year. As your team racks up wins and climbs the divisional ladder, you unlock new arena options that take your club HQ from a small community rink to a state-of-the-art hockey palace. Four new player classes should bring more diversity to the on-ice action as well.

Developer EA Canada spent a lot of time listening to requests of its hardcore players, and has several gameplay changes aimed at satisfying long-term demands. Checking in particular has been a sore spot for many fans because of inconsistent outcomes. This year EA tweaked the system to take velocity into account more and disrupt puck possession earlier in the animation. Stationary checkers now shove opponents instead of delivering crushing blows, and the puck will continue on its trajectory instead of landing next to the downed carrier and allowing them to regain possession before the defender has a chance to grab the puck. A new net-battle mechanic and new goaltending animations that allow bigger goalies to use their bodies to block shots instead of making dramatic reactionary saves should change the kinds of goals you see scored.

Fans unsatisfied with the gameplay now have access to the same sliders the developers use to fine-tune gameplay, allowing them to adjust everything from the frequency certain penalties are called to how much players bobble passes.

A new team-building dynamic in Hockey Ultimate Team, the World Cup of Hockey tournament, the addition of the ECHL, and EA Canada's own take on Madden's Draft Champions mode round out the list of considerable changes coming to the series.

Several other long-requested renovations like a new scouting, drafting, free agency, and mid-season contract negotiations are still absent, but EA is confident the changes it's making this year should set the franchise up to address these areas in the near future. Should these points of emphasis be successful in NHL 17, it appears the lone hockey series available to fans could finally be trending in the right direction. • **Matt Bertz**

Wilson's Heart

A monochrome adventure spashed in blood

» Platforms
Rift

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Oculus Studios

» Developer
Twisted Pixel

» Release
2017

Twisted Pixel is taking a big risk with Wilson's Heart. Jump scares and horror in general must be handled delicately in virtual reality, especially as we are still learning how emotionally heightened experiences impact players. Thankfully, a deft cinematic hand hints that the studio is on the right track.

Wilson's Heart, which makes use of Oculus' upcoming Touch controllers, is a tactile enhancement of the point-and-click adventure genre. With monochrome aesthetics, matter-of-fact dialogue, and just the right bit of weird, it appears to borrow liberally from *The Twilight Zone* oeuvre.

As players move around the environment via a fixed-point teleportation locomotion approach, they find strange objects, bloody bodies, and disconcerting events that make us question what's real and what's a hallucination. One moment, Wilson stumbles upon the beaten, dead body of a doctor. The next, he struggles to convince a nurse what he's seen. Sadly, she comes to believe him too late.

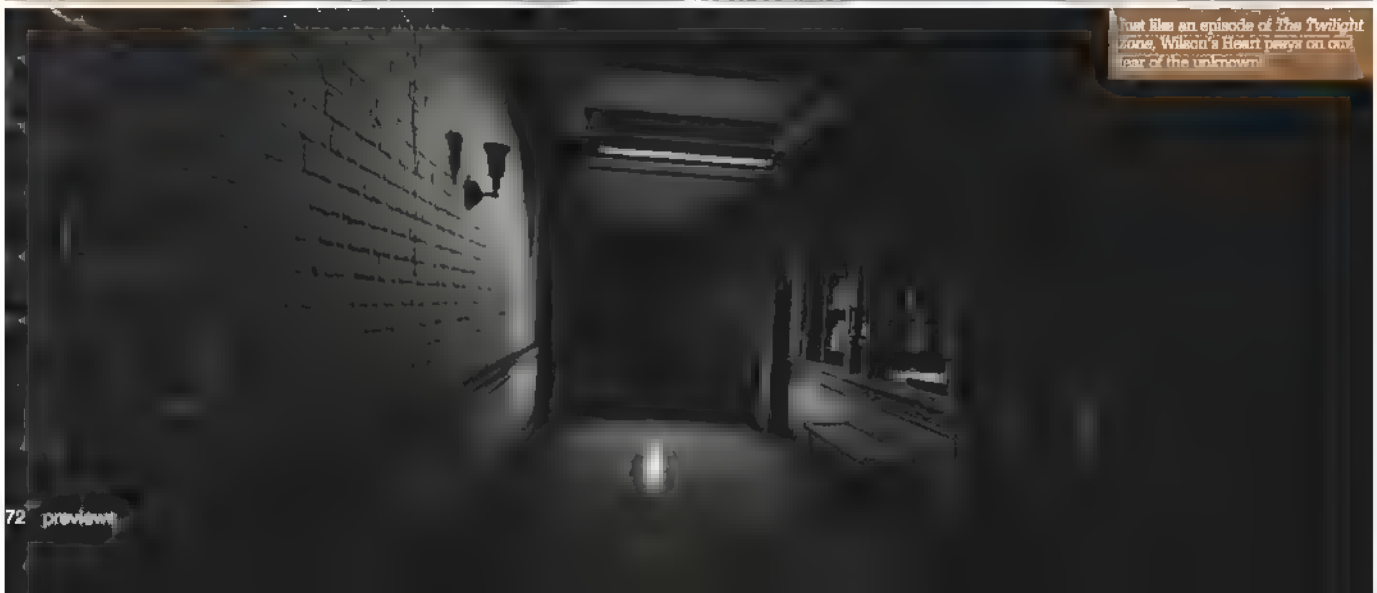
Wilson's Heart builds upon older LucasArts adventures and more contemporary expressions of that genre from Telltale, Dontnod, and The Odd Gentlemen. However, being inside that creepy, destroyed hospital brings that type of gameplay experience to new heights.

It's one thing to move an avatar around a flat image. It's another to open a cabinet and have a rat jump toward your face in virtual reality. The jump scares are extremely cinematic in nature, hitting hard, but subsiding quickly and giving players enough time to let the tension ease. They work well so far, but I'm concerned about how someone with a more sensitive constitution might react to them.

Wilson's Heart isn't just intriguing for its horror elements, though. A compelling story is being woven even from the first moments. With Peter Weller (*RoboCop*) in the lead role and Alfred Molina (*Spider-Man 2*) and Rosario Dawson (*Sin City*) joining him, those interested in a frightful VR adventure have a lot to look forward to.

» Michael Futter

Wilson's Heart infuses traditional adventure with a dose of horror.



Just like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, Wilson's Heart preys on our fear of the unknown.

Hand Of Fate 2

Deal us back in

The original Hand of Fate had a clever premise. Players composed a deck of cards full of encounters, weapons, and enemies, and then an A.I.-controlled dealer dealt out a random dungeon in front of them. As players explored this card-created world they quickly powered up their hero while engaging in miniature story encounters in the vein of Dungeons & Dragons. Each playthrough unlocked new cards as players worked their way up a chain of fearsome boss monsters. Defiant Development's upcoming sequel sticks close to that formula while tweaking some of the original's wonky mechanics to hopefully create a more rounded experience.

One of the big new changes in Hand of Fate 2 is the addition of multiple win conditions. In the first game, players won a round of cards when they reached the end of a dungeon and faced off against a boss. For the sequel, new final objective cards are shuffled into the deck before the game starts, and these cards might task you with surviving a set amount of time or ask you to attain a certain amount of gold before clearing the dungeon.

This diversity of mission objectives extends down to each encounter card. For example, during one encounter we met a goblin who asked for our help robbing a few unsuspecting guards. In the first game, this encounter would have ended as soon as we'd smashed the goon's heads against the ground, but this was a timed encounter, so we weren't expected to defeat the guards, just hold them off while the goblins lightened their coin purses. Once the goblin was done, he jumped through a magic portal and we quickly followed suit.

This goblin wasn't the only friendly being we encounter on the road. Later on, we ran into a few thugs who were shaking down a bard. After chasing the thugs away, the bard offers to join our quest. Companions like the bard join you in battle, but they also aid you outside of combat. For example, this bard's perk allowed us to reselect quest rewards if we weren't happy with our spoils. Our lute-playing friend also provided commentary during story encounters and negotiated a weapons trade that saved us 50 gold.

Near the end of the dungeon, we discovered a treasure chest that allowed us to experiment with Hand of Fate 2's new dice minigame. When players face dexterity challenges, they must roll a set of dice in hopes of reaching a target number. If players fail to roll the correct number, they can choose to reroll any number of the dice at least once. This is a simple minigame, but it helps shake up the action and provides a small strategic challenge.

The original Hand of Fate was only a few cards shy of a full deck. It had an excellent concept and theme that was marred by repetitive combat. Thankfully, Hand of Fate 2's Arkham-style action feels much tighter, so Defiant Development might be holding all the aces when this sequel drops later next year. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
Xbox One
PC • Mac

» **[redacted]**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Defiant Development

» **Developer**
Defiant Development

» **Release**
2017

Story Of Seasons: Trio Of Towns

The harvest continues

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Xseed Games

» **Developer**
Marvelous Interactive

» **Release**
2017

If you've had enough of saving the galaxy in video games, maybe it's time to trade your pulse rifle and power armor for a tiller and overalls. The laid-back farming gameplay in Story of Seasons (formerly known as Harvest Moon) has been quietly entertaining its audience for many years, weaving together chores, nature, and relationships into simulated harmony. These themes continue in the latest installment, Trio of Towns, but with improvements to make your time on the farm more enjoyable.

As the name implies, Trio of Towns has players cultivating land in the proximity of three different settlements. Each one has a different theme: an Old West town, an island paradise, and a traditional Far Eastern village. "Most Japanese players cannot experience farming as it's done in North America... and in the same sense most North American players can't experience the day-to-day life in Japan," says Marvelous Interactive head of development Yoshifumi Hashimoto. "They cannot do these things in real life, so I thought it would be fun for them to be able to do this in the game." The three towns are close to each other, so even with increased ground to cover, travel times should remain reasonable as you move back and forth.

One of the most notable changes is the restoration of a feature missing in the previous entry: the shipping box. This gives players an easy place to drop goods and receive money in return, without having to worry too much about a complex economy system. "While we did have a trading system in the last Story of Seasons, there was feedback from the community that it was too complicated," Hashimoto says. "To address the issue for Trio of Towns we have brought the shipping box back, but have streamlined the process to make it more user-friendly."

Other new features for Trio of Towns include an expanded pet system (including one that you select as your "soul mate" to work alongside you), more strategies for planting and optimizing your crops, and different styles for your wedding based on the towns' cultures. The multiplayer is also being revamped, because malicious players could ruin farms under the old system, the co-op is now located exclusively on an island that does not grant access to other parts of players' worlds. This allows players to engage in peaceful activities (like fishing) together, without worrying about any hard work going to waste.

Stardew Valley was a surprise hit on PC earlier this year, demonstrating a desire for farming simulations on the platform – but Stardew Valley might have more competition soon. "From the very beginning of developing [Story of Seasons], we've always researched and tested the games on each platform, from consoles to handhelds, to develop on the system that works best for the game style at that time," Hashimoto says. "Now that we have developed and learned from almost two decades of games, we think developing for the PC may be possible and it might happen." The team doesn't have any announcements to make at this time, but the series has jumped platforms before, so we have to wait to see what the future holds as it approaches its 20th anniversary. » **Joe Juba**

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit Of Justice

Getting the gang back together

When the original Ace Attorney released in North America in 2005, it earned a devoted following thanks to memorable characters like Phoenix Wright, Miles Edgeworth, and Maya Fey. Subsequent installments added even more members to the colorful cast, which has since swelled to an impressive size. No new installment could include cameos and storylines for every familiar face, but it seems like Spirit of Justice is attempting to squeeze in as many fan-favorites as possible.

The latest entry is set after the events of 2013's Dual Destinies, with heroes Phoenix Wright and Apollo Justice tackling cases in different areas. While Apollo works from their agency's office, Phoenix travels to the Kingdom of Khura'in in the Far East – the birthplace of the spirit-channeling technique seen in previous installments. Players get reacquainted with returning characters like Athena Cykes and Trucy Wright as the story progresses, but the most intriguing reappearance is Maya Fey (who has been conspicuously absent in recent titles). Phoenix's friend and former assistant is tied into the events he unravels in Khura'in.

Part of the fun in Ace Attorney is being surprised by unexpected cameos, so we won't ruin all of the secrets. Much of the series' appeal comes from its charming characters and twisting stories, but Spirit of Justice also has some new elements to help you avoid a guilty verdict. The biggest addition is the "Divination Séance," a ritual in Khura'in that displays the last moments of a victim's life in a spirit pool. This vision is then interpreted by a priestess, who reveals the guilty party. Similar to pressing statements in previous games, you can call out discrepancies between the vision and the priestess' interpretation, bringing you closer to the truth.

Spirit of Justice probably won't win over anyone who hasn't enjoyed Ace Attorney in the past. However, the new locations and mechanics – along with the opportunity to see the characters' stories continue – should be enough to get any fan excited. » Joe Juba

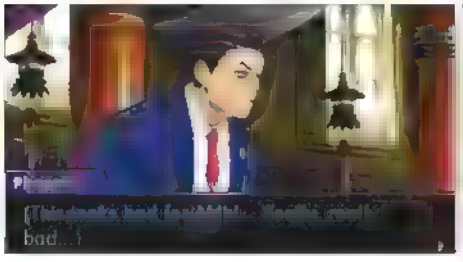
[redacted]
3DS

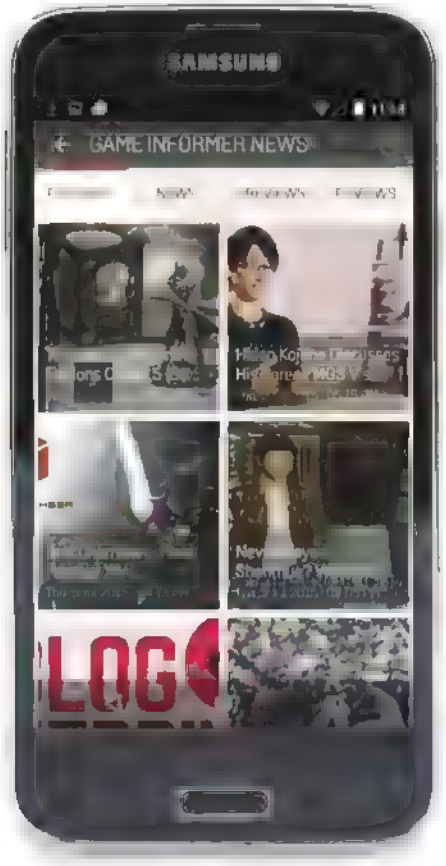
» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

[redacted]
September





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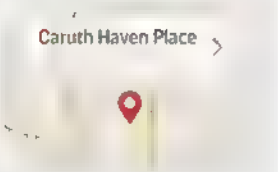

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reviews

gamefarmer GAME OF THE MONTH

89 Monster Hunter Generations

Capcom's Monster Hunter franchise continues to offer a compelling, exciting loop filled with exploration, gathering, crafting, customizing, and massive monsters. Seasoned veterans have new options and more freedom to explore various gameplay styles, while newcomers can enjoy a robust companion system and a more streamlined start. Monster Hunter Generations doesn't fundamentally change the systems that have made the series a success, but that's more of a strength than a weakness. –

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Our servers are experiencing issues. Please come back later.

AWARDS

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gamefarmer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gamefarmer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gamefarmer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

Abzû

Finding the way through the darkness

8

PS4 • PC

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Giant Squid **Release** August 2 **Rating** E

» Concept
Explore an underwater world and uncover the surprises and beautiful moments within

» Graphics
Gorgeous visuals mix saturated hues with detail and subtlety

» Sound
Austin Wintory's soundtrack is amazing; it always finds the right tone and timing. The music and ambient sounds are crucial

» Playability
The swimming and camera controls are easy to use, and inverted options are available if you want them

» Entertainment
Abzû isn't for everyone, but it has its rewards if you stop to enjoy them

» Replay Value
Moderately high

I didn't know what I'd find within Abzû's waters, or whether the answers I was looking for were truly down in the depths. The more I played, the more I became fixated on finding explanations in every facet of the game's story and a clear sense of how its gameplay compared to other titles I've played. That clarity is there if you want it, but in the end I found more pleasure in the moments and world that developer Giant Squid created than the actual reasons at its center.

Abzû creates its own space between genres and expectations. I explored the seas as a lonesome diver and relished letting my curiosity take over as I opened new areas, encountered sea life, and investigated the forces acting against the ecosystem. The game has simple gameplay mechanics that let you interact with the world in order to continue your movement through it, but gameplay is not the core of the experience.

Abzû is not an open world, but it's exciting to see what's around every corner, even if the path you're treading is linear. The environment doesn't have a lot of objects or avenues for interaction, but it's also not like an adventure title where you are reduced to running around the room pressing a button just to see if you can make something happen. The ambient sea life fills this void like a character in and of itself, and you can study their hypnotic movements from meditation spots in the environment.

Becoming entranced with Abzû is easy. The placid sea life and the sumptuous visuals envelop you, and both are refreshed by great diversity. Austin Wintory's excellent soundtrack surrounds the entire experience. It's more than an accompaniment; like the sea life that fills the screen, the music is a vital component that imbues everything that happens. The ambient sounds also do a great job carving a niche through the otherwise silent murk.

As I uncovered buried drones that opened new areas, and discovered glyphs depicting the concerns of a previous civilization, I started to wonder if there were other gameplay surprises in store. But when the simple switches to open gates didn't hold my attention, invariably something would happen – like joining a pod of blue whales diving into parts unknown – that would re-capture my attention and fire my imagination. At moments like this I ceased to care about gameplay. In this way, Giant Squid attempts a delicate equilibrium in Abzû; adding additional gameplay elements like more controls or brain-twisting puzzles, or bowing to gamification, would evaporate what it is.

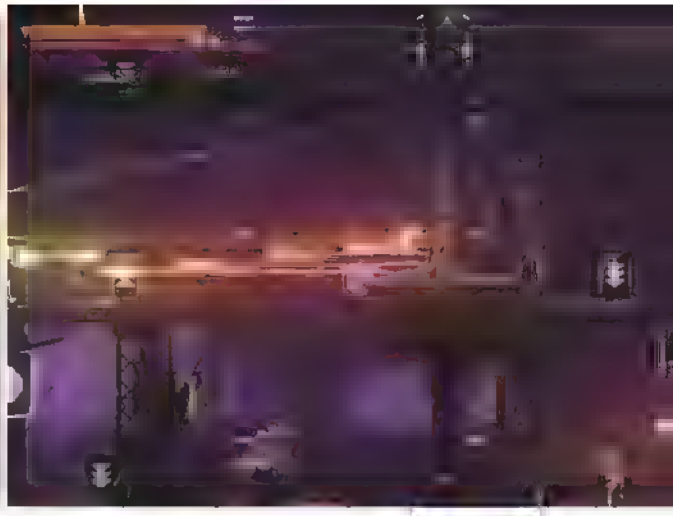
Yet I'm at a loss for what exactly this game is missing. Instead, I can only understand it by corollary: I didn't feel fundamentally different about the game world or my experience in it at the end as I did the beginning. Abzû's story of a diver transforming an underwater world and uncovering its secrets wasn't exactly disappointing, but the greatest moments are those you find outside of the story: the majesty of a giant squid or the rhythmic movements of an ecosystem that feels alive.

The themes of evolution and artificial intelligence remind me of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (co-written by noted author Arthur C. Clarke), which puts it in heady territory. Is the game's great white shark the monolith? The machine intelligence in the game even has a reddish mono eye similar to HAL 9000, and needless to say isn't a very friendly presence. How did that happen?

Abzû is a game of mysteries and its world will move you to muse the beauty of life and our place in it. It contains moments that transcend the simple act of playing a video game by making a connection with the beings around you – a profound experience. But the more I try to earnestly weigh the substance of the story the more I feel like I am missing the essence of what is before me – not unlike Kubrick's movie. After the film was released, a lot of critics asked him what it meant, but he didn't want to be drawn into any exact explanation. There simply isn't one, and he preferred the viewer absorb the experience and reflect on their own thoughts regardless. Abzû treads similar lines, and is closer to being a work of art than many games ever will be. Whether you're supposed to play a game or experience it is a larger question that Abzû does not solve, but only indulges. Still, it must be judged by that query even if the answer is ultimately up to you. » **Matthew Kato**

Headlander

An oddly engaging adventure



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Adult Swim Games **Developer** Double Fine **Release** July 26 **Rating** T

7.5

PC

There's really no other way to put this: In Headlander, you play as a disembodied head. Fortunately for you, the space-age setting is tailor-made for someone in your predicament. Humanity has opted out of its flesh-and-blood cages in favor of uploaded consciousness and robotic bodies. With a little ingenuity and suction, you can pop off the heads of friendly NPCs and enemies and take over. It's definitely weird (did I mention it's a Double Fine game?), but this Metroid-style adventure is more than just its oddball concept.

After awakening from cryosleep, you learn that what's left of humanity is being controlled by an A.I. named Methuselah. A friendly voice fills you in on the details, serving as a near-constant guide, putting waypoints on your map to keep the journey moving. In those early moments, you get a sense of just what you can do. Being a bodiless head is disconcerting at first, but it has advantages. Your helmet is equipped with thrusters, and using them to hover and zoom around the 2.5D environments is simple and satisfying. You also have access to a vacuum-like ability, which can be used to not only wrench heads from their bodies, but access panels from walls. And don't worry: You're told early on that the people you "liberate" from their bodies instantly have their consciousness zapped into a new body.

These new bodies let you access different areas. Doors are controlled by a snarky A.I., who keeps a close eye on who passes through. Just about anyone can get through plain doors, but others require more specialized bodies. Guards and other hostiles are helpfully color coded, which allows them to walk through similarly colored doors unhindered. If you yank off a red guard's head, you can then cruise through red doors. The environments are maze-like, but navigating them is simple thanks to an onboard map and myriad shortcuts. While backtracking is a necessary part of the game, it doesn't feel punitive – aside from having to juggle bodies to operate elevator platforms, which is a common occurrence in the second half.

Depending on the body you're using, you have access to different weapons. You aim with the right stick, and you can take cover behind various objects. Taking the time to aim is important, since you can bank your energy beams off background objects for some slick trick shots. While it's viable to blast enemies away until they explode, I quickly learned that a take-no-prisoners strategy wasn't the smartest play. Going for headshots not only neutralized threats, but it was a clever way to reward accuracy, since I could plop onto the intact body and hijack it without spending time extracting the head.

Headlander settles into a rhythm quickly, for good and bad. One of the things I like about this genre is how you can see a place that's inaccessible, knowing you'll eventually get a skill allowing you to get there but not quite knowing how. That element is here, but it's reduced, since the majority of the time you know that getting behind that blue or yellow door is just a matter of finding a blue or yellow body. You gain abilities through item pickups and a skill tree, but these either offer additional health or energy pips or subtle tweaks to your core set. However, Double Fine deserves a standing ovation for resisting the urge to create lame puzzles with pressure pads.

The base framework is simple, but presents interesting and memorable showcases. One highlight takes place in a rogue A.I.'s weird version of chess, where humanoids with chess pieces run around an arena battling it out. You have to masquerade as various pieces, download data from terminals, and hustle over to the upload station alive. All the while, you're in the middle of a firefight between both factions. It was a frantic change of pace from exploration, and I loved it. I wish I could say the same for the boss fights, which are rare bummers. They either require bizarrely elevated levels of precision or rely on mechanics that you don't otherwise use. They're not impossible, but considering the how player-friendly everything else is, they feel harsh.

Headlander doesn't forge a bold new path, but it's a lot of fun to live in its strange world for a while. Its various elements are well trod – '70s aesthetic, Metroid-style exploration, big questions about the nature of identity and consciousness – but they've been arranged in a fascinating way that feels fresh. » Jeff Cork

» **Concept**
Take control of a floating head – and a variety of robotic bodies – to navigate labyrinthine environments and solve the mystery of your existence

» **Graphics**
Double Fine displays a loving homage to '70s sci-fi chic in all its shag-carpeted glory

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is a great accompaniment to the retro style, with lots of synths and spacey effects

» **Playability**
Controls are easy and intuitive, and piloting your disembodied head around is a surprising joy

» **Entertainment**
The game is loaded with Double Fine's signature humor, from snappy dialogue to turrets that apologize while firing at you

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

I Am Setsuna

Frozen in time

2.5

PS4 • PC

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Tokyo RPG Factory **Release** July 19 **Rating** E10+

» Concept
Tap into fans' fond memories with an old-school RPG inspired by classics like Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy

» Graphics
The snowy environments are impressive at first, but the lack of variety among them is a problem when stretched over an entire journey

» Sound
Somber piano dominates the soundtrack to great effect

» Playability
Basic combat and exploration is simple and intuitive. Navigating between menus to access specific combos is cumbersome and time-consuming

» Entertainment
It may be bland, but the experience doesn't make any unforgiveable missteps. The combat has occasional moments of brilliance that recall the glory days of '90s RPGs

» Replay Value
Moderately low

For those of us who love 16-bit RPGs, few titles are held in higher regard than Chrono Trigger. Its inventive battle system, time-hopping story, and excellent presentation make it a beloved classic of a bygone era. Chrono Trigger has inspired countless RPG developers over the years, but never has that inspiration been so apparent as it is in I Am Setsuna. While that might sound like an answered prayer to many fans of the genre, you should keep your hopes modest. I Am Setsuna's best gameplay and story beats are so rooted in its predecessors (and often directly copied from them) that it feels familiar and predictable. With a fine line dividing homage and imitation, I Am Setsuna doesn't do enough to carve out its own identity.

Though it borrows liberally from venerable titles, the team at Tokyo RPG Factory took a smart approach to adapting combat. I Am Setsuna's traditional turn-based battle system is the major draw, blending old ideas and new twists. With three characters to command and encounters taking place right in the environments, Chrono Trigger's influence is clear – especially since you also initiate powerful combo attacks using two (and later all three) characters. The basic mechanics are comfortable and fun, but the addition of momentum mode creates an extra layer of strategy. You stock up momentum points as battles progress (by attacking, taking damage, waiting, etc), and then activate them at critical points. The effects depend on the specific command – you might add extra damage, confer a status boost, or heal your whole party.

Using momentum goes a surprisingly long way toward making encounters more engaging. Choosing when to use or reserve it adds tension, and the varied effects it produces provide a lot of tactical options. Do you risk an attack now hoping to finish off your foe, or do you use momentum to augment a defensive skill and set up a killing blow later? It also encourages you to try out different party members, if only to see what effects your party's combined skills produce. Unfortunately, this system is late to reach its full potential during a few fun (and difficult) boss fights. The first three quarters of the adventure are mind-numbingly easy, which leads to a sharp difficulty spike when you encounter foes that require a fuller understanding of buffs, debuffs, and party composition. These fights were initially frustrating, but the tactical thinking and potential for failure eventually made them my favorite moments of the game.

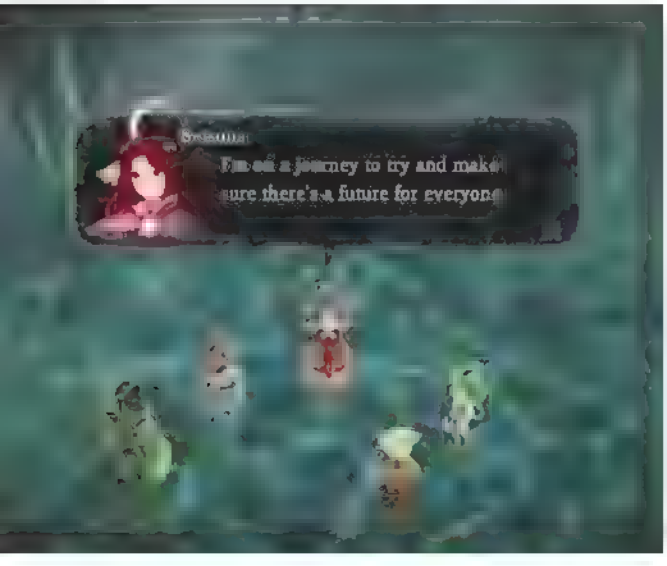
Combat is the only area that I Am Setsuna successfully builds on its classic foundation; many other elements feel bland, unpolished, or copied. The story is lifted straight from Final Fantasy X: A young woman (with a group of protectors at her side) undertakes a journey of sacrifice, planning to trade her life to earn the world a temporary reprieve from monster attacks. The plot walks a well-worn path – including the allies and foes you meet – and no turn of events is ever surprising, so getting invested is difficult. Since the characters rarely get dedicated time in the spotlight, I didn't grow attached to any of them during my 25-hour playthrough. If I had, I would have been disappointed by how their arcs conclude in the unsatisfying ending.

Your allies feel like hollow containers for different abilities, but setting up those abilities is clunky. You can easily miss some materials that are required to learn new skills, and you can only equip a limited number of abilities. That becomes a problem, since cross-referencing multiple menu screens is a hassle when you want to make certain dual- and trip e-techs accessible.

I Am Setsuna's other periphery systems, like weapon upgrading and cooking, feel vestigial. They are technically present, but are shallow to the point of uselessness. For example, cooking recipes are rare and don't have interesting effects. Improving weapons is just as pointless, because something better is never far away.

I Am Setsuna has lots of nods to Chrono Trigger, from its general combat framework to specific references to skills like X-Strike and Luminaire. However, it doesn't capture why most players connected to that seminal title. Even though the combat is entertaining, I Am Setsuna's characters are dull, the environments are repetitive, and the story is predictable. I would like to see more games inspired by the golden era of 16-bit RPGs, but you can't recapture the spirit of innovation and experimentation that pervaded those titles through mimicry alone.

▪ Joe Juba



Song Of The Deep

An endearing but rocky voyage to the bottom of the sea

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** GameTrust **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** July 12 **Rating** E

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Explore a vast kingdom beneath the sea in a rickety-yet-powerful submarine

» **Graphics**
Environments are gorgeous and the cutscenes' picture-book aesthetic helps make this Metroid-inspired game stand out

» **Sound**
A fantastic synth soundtrack and lively narration result in entrancing sound design

» **Playability**
Finicky controls and puzzles that require precision are ultimately Song of the Deep's biggest weaknesses

» **Entertainment**
A charming story and enjoyable combat make the journey worth taking even if subpar puzzles, technical issues, and frustrating controls drag down the experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Song of the Deep is a charmingly straightforward game that wastes no time getting to the heart of matters. A young girl named Merryn lives with in poverty with her story-spinning, sea-captain father. One day, dad goes missing after a trip to the ocean. What does Merryn do? Why, the natural thing. She builds a submarine and delves beneath the waves to search for him. She discovers the forbidden city of her father's tales, and must face the dangers lurking there if she ever wants to see him again.

Song of the Deep is a solid action/adventure title that has you navigating a giant undersea environment filled with secrets and collecting power-ups for your submarine, which initially starts with only a weak grappling hook to attack enemies and pick up objects needed to solve puzzles. The entire adventure takes place on a large map that's loaded at the onset of each game, allowing you to seamlessly travel from area to area, though several of them are locked away until you find the necessary power-ups (like a sonar blast) to remove barriers as you progress. These power-ups also let you reach secrets hidden away beneath buildings and in alcoves.

Combat sequences are a good deal of fun; you zip around coral arenas, firing your hook at giant jellyfish and vomit-spewing anglerfish. Every new upgrade adds more options during these fights, like using a special torpedo to freeze enemies or a molten one to deal damage to them over time. Adjusting to the velocity and quirks of your submarine takes a bit of time, especially with the waves of enemies coming at you early on. However, I found a tremendous amount of joy in narrowly dodging a giant bullet fired from a cannon, spinning around, and launching a powered-up hook attack to decimate the enemies surging toward me. Overcoming overwhelming odds by using the tools at your disposal conveys a satisfying sense of power.

Certain enemy encounters shake things up by requiring you to embrace new strategies, like only being able to damage the belly of a foe capable of sending homing torpedoes at you. In these fights, you need to maneuver around coral reefs and corners to evade fire, popping out of cover to fire a torpedo at the foe's weak spot. Another enemy hurls mines that you have to catch with your claw and throw back in his face. It's in these combat encounters that Song of the Deep works best, forcing you to master strafing and the weapons in your arsenal. Too bad that's only half the game.

About halfway through, Song of the Deep takes a sudden and sharp turn into puzzle territory, where you have to use objects like ammunition balls or glass reflectors to solve environmental puzzles. The shift isn't a problem in itself; the issue is the powerful disconnect between the control scheme and the precision that these challenges require. For example, one section where you have to bounce a ball around with the tip of your sub nose to get it to reach a high up place is particularly annoying. The slightest movement in the wrong direction results in the ball falling to its doom, forcing you to go back to get a new one and do the whole thing again. Several sections are like this, with the best puzzles resulting not in a sense of triumph over solving them, but instead a wave of relief that they were not as frustrating as the one I solved an hour before. Song of the Deep's puzzles are the worst kinds of puzzles, where performing the solution is much harder than figuring out what that solution is.

To make matters worse, a bevy of technical issues affect the playability of Song of the Deep. During my playthrough, I found three segments where I had to navigate through passages filled with traps capable of killing you in one hit. Each area was accompanied by a massive framerate drop, making navigation more of a crapshoot than a trial involving skill. Another glitch kept an essential item needed to solve a puzzle from respawning, and there was no way for me to know that item wasn't there until I restarted the game and the item magically appeared.

Luckily, Song of the Deep's combat and beautiful presentation, showing cutscenes as colorful storybook illustrations accompanied by narration from an Irish-accented speaker, push the game a fair distance above its failings and make it a journey worth taking for anyone who enjoys Metroid-inspired games or action/adventure games with interesting stories.

» Javy Gwaltney

Disclaimer: GameTrust is the publishing label of GameStop, the parent company of Game Informer. All opinions in this review are the author's based on his experience with the game.

Umbrella Corps

Undead on arrival

Style 1-Player Shooter (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** June 21 **Rating** M

5

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
A tactical, fast-paced, multiplayer shooter set in the Resident Evil universe

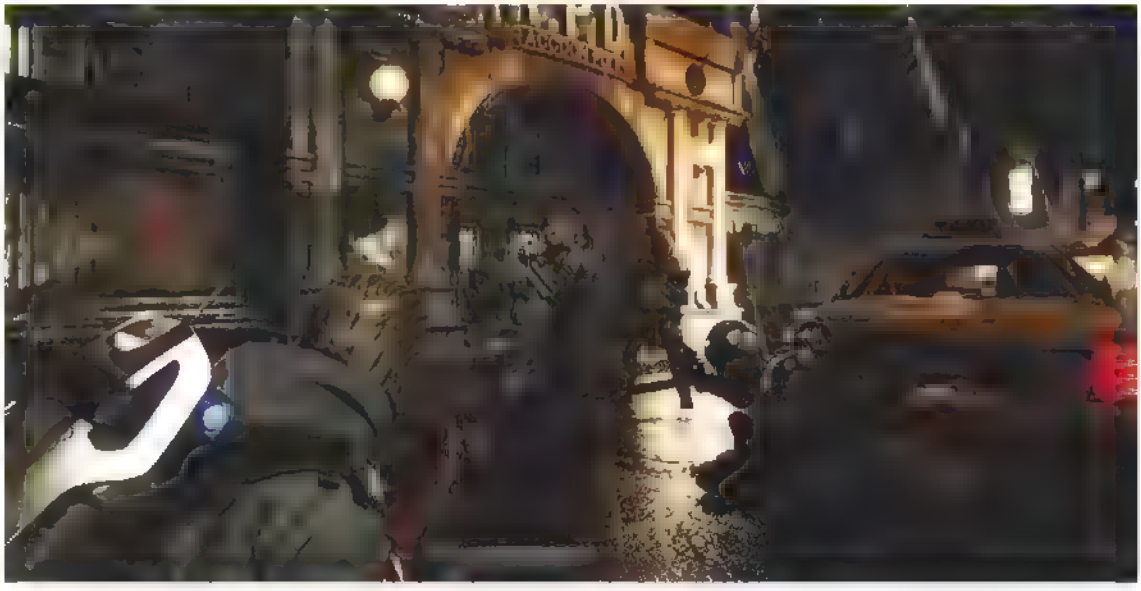
» **Graphics**
The environment and characters are passable, but the effects when a zombie crawls out of the ground are pretty cool

» **Sound**
The undead moaning and rifle-fire sound familiar, but offer little reason to crank up the volume

» **Playability**
The controls feel squishy and the movement speed is crazy fast, which results in a lot of twitch action

» **Entertainment Value**
If you could find a match consistently you'd experience the mediocre gunplay. Unfortunately, you'll be staring at a matchmaking screen more than playing the game

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



On a conceptual level, Umbrella Corps is interesting. I like the idea of a cover-based multiplayer shooter where you have to contend with other players alongside A.I.-controlled undead hordes. I like that the firefights take place in environments pulled straight from the Resident Evil series' history. I even like the insane movement speed, which results in lightning-round battles. Though these aspects had potential, Umbrella Corps uses them to prove that ideas are nothing without proper execution.

Umbrella Corps has a muddy sense of direction at best – and a conflicting one at worst. It's a cover-based shooter, but taking cover is useless since it inhibits your movement and makes it harder to react to your speedy foes. It's a hyper-fast shooter, but the maps are too small to accommodate this movement speed; in fact, they're so small that you sometimes spawn in the middle of a firefight. It's an online-only shooter with a progression system that starts unlocking new guns right away, but most of the cosmetic unlocks are pointless because you're better camouflaged in the basic black outfit you start with.

Capcom is trying to be different, which you'll notice as soon as you jump into one of the game's two main multiplayer modes. The first is One Life Mode, a 3v3 version of team deathmatch where you don't respawn. This mode aims to provide nerve-wracking team-based tactical firefights where you slowly outmaneuver your opponents. Unfortunately, the game's hyper-fast movement speed doesn't allow for slow, tactical firefights, and most matches end in a blitz of gunfire before you pop back out to the matchmaking screen.

The second online option is a multi-mission mode, which has you working as a team to complete a series of randomly generated missions, including variations on the popular king of the hill, capture the flag, and team deathmatch modes. Missions are chosen randomly at the start of each round, and the first team to win three rounds wins the game. I like this randomized element, but it is strange that none of these match types have their own separate mode. If you simply want to play traditional team deathmatch, for example, you have to jump into multi-mission mode and hope it pops into circulation.

Other players aren't your only enemies in Umbrella Corps as every level is filled with shambling undead. Thankfully, you're equipped with a zombie jammer backpack that prevents zombies from attacking you. The technology sounds ridiculous, but it theoretically creates a neat tension between you and the zombies. Most of the time you can ignore these flesh eaters, but if an enemy takes out your jammer, the nearby hordes can trample you and finish the job. However, this almost never happens. Most players die after only a couple hits, so it's rare for a player to survive when their jammer takes enough hits to power down. Even when a jammer does go out, players are fast enough that they can easily run away from the zombies, so these walking corpses don't pose much of a threat.

Thanks to all of its flaws, Umbrella Corps feels like a grotesque online oddity that everyone should just ignore – which everyone is already doing. Umbrella Corps' launch had little fanfare and a poor reception among fans. As a result, finding a match is difficult. On average, I waited five to ten minutes for games to start, so you inevitably spend more time waiting to play Umbrella Corps than actually playing it – and neither are entertaining. The only solution to this problem would be to convince five of your friends to buy the game and play it with you, but that's how friendships are destroyed.

Umbrella Corps is an unusual online shooter. Unfortunately, its odd mix of mechanics don't come together well, and its online matchmaking is a total joke. I once waited almost 20 minutes for a match that lasted less than 10 minutes. In that amount of time, you could drive to the store and buy a better game. ▪ **Ben Reeves**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version of Umbrella Corps. The game is also available on PC.

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

A fun expansion of Star Wars' canon

gamerinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** TT Fusion **Release** June 28 **Rating** E10+

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360

» Concept
An ambitious adaptation that goes beyond the film's story to reveal new secrets and corners of the Star Wars universe

» Graphics
Beautifully animated and filled with little touches like mouse droids scurrying across Starkiller Base

» Sound
The most impressive part of the game. Harrison Ford, Daisy Ridley, Carrie Fisher, Anthony Daniels, John Boyega, Oscar Isaac, and Adam Driver all reprise their roles. John Williams' soundtrack is also used extensively

» Playability
New cover-based shooting and building options expand the scope of play and reduce the repetition typically in Lego titles. The open-world content is also good, giving players a mountain of secrets to unearth

» Entertainment
A blast for Star Wars and Lego fans alike

» Replay Value
High

I never thought I would say this, but Star Wars fans should play a Lego game for new Star Wars canon. After finishing up my playthrough of Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens, I walked away with a better understanding of who Lor San Tekka is, and how he obtained the map leading to Luke Skywalker. I also learned more about two of Maz Kanata's patrons, and the vital role they played in thwarting the First Order's bid for galactic domination. The game also provides a good look at Han Solo and Chewbacca's smuggling operations, and lets us play through their hunting expedition for the ravenous rathtars. C-3PO's red arm, Poe Dameron's rescue of Admiral Ackbar, and more dangling plot points are explained in fun adventures that are surprisingly faithful to the feature film's core content.

How faithful? Harrison Ford provides a wealth of new voice work, as does Carrie Fisher, Anthony Daniels, Daisy Ridley, Oscar Isaac, John Boyega, and Adam Driver. The content in this game is better than any deleted scene on the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* Blu-ray, and is almost encyclopedic in how much of the film is explored. On top of the new story material, the game introduces a wealth of interesting characters and planets, and allows players to thoroughly explore locations that were only briefly shown in the movie.

The content is exciting to dive into, but temper your expectations; as true as developer TT Fusion is to the new Star Wars continuity, The Force Awakens is still a Lego game at heart, and it is every bit as silly and lighthearted as any Lego title before it. That means that Ford was brought in to voice lines about "wookiee cookies," Chewbacca's favorite treat, which is referenced numerous times throughout the story. The First Order's prized stormtrooper army is composed of a bunch of slacking buffoons, more likely to be seen relaxing in hot tubs than doing their jobs correctly. The game strikes a nice balance between interesting and absurd Star Wars content, appeasing both fans of Star Wars and the Lego games at the same time.

TT Fusion successfully introduces a couple of new gameplay concepts into its tried-and-true mix. Cover-based shooting may sound like a bad idea in this context, but it works surprisingly well most of the time, and is strictly used within specific sections of levels. These firefights offer simplistic pop-and-shoot functionality, but are more successful in the puzzle elements they bring, like figuring out how to take out a shielded turret or stop a stormtrooper onslaught.

The puzzle play is also heightened through piles of bricks that can be used to assemble two or three contraptions. Players must figure out what they need to build to succeed, and what order each of the objects needs to be constructed in to help a character reach a specific part of the environment. Both of these new gameplay additions reduces the number of door- and character-based interactions we see in any given stage, cutting down the repetition that plagues most Lego games.

Although The Force Awakens is largely based on just one movie, TT Fusion somehow managed to include over 200 playable characters into the mix. Yes, that number includes a handful of stormtrooper variants, and over 30 familiar faces pulled from the classic and prequel trilogies, but most of these characters are new to the Lego games, and hardly any of them were in the film for more than a few seconds.

Vehicles play just as large of a role as the characters, and are either deployed for fun, freeform aerial dogfighting, or terrible ground assaults. The vehicles control well in the dogfighting levels, but lack intensity given there is no fail state. The ground assaults are buggy messes featuring the M crofighter versions of vehicles like X-Wings and TIE Fighters. The rival ships often get stuck on environmental objects, leading to effortless kills and laughs for all of the wrong reasons.

As polished and beautiful as some sequences are, the game is a little rough around the edges. I ran into a variety of bugs, including an infinite death loop I couldn't get out of and cutscenes not triggering, both resulting in having to restart the levels.

Regardless of the numerous frustrations, I had fun combing the open worlds for hidden gold bricks, and seeing Harrison Ford in action again as Han Solo. I can't stress just how cool this is, and he did a fantastic job reprising his role. A Lego title is a strange choice to deliver new Star Wars story material, but it works surprisingly well, and gives fans plenty of interesting and new content to digest.

» Andrew Reiner

Dead By Daylight

A nightmare we're glad never ends

8.25

PC

Style 2 to 5-Player Online Action **Publisher** Starbreeze **Developer** Behaviour **Release** June 14 **Rating** M

» Concept
Asymmetrical multiplayer in which up to four victims must escape from one of three disfigured killers

» Graphics
A creepy atmosphere and striking designs for the killer win out over bland survivors and environments that could use more variety

» Sound
Play with headphones and listen for the ominous, thudding heartbeat that signifies the killer is near. You need to play with the volume up, as the audio is crucial

» Playability
Controls are tight, whether playing with mouse and keyboard or gamepad. Just be ready for QTE skill checks as the victims

» Entertainment
The tension is high in every match, with jump scares and thrilling chases peppering each encounter with the killer

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Dead by Daylight rolls out like a playable horror movie, pitting an unstoppable villain against a group of up to four survivors running for their lives. The team of survivors has nothing to rely on but their wits while avoiding their lone foe. The goal is the same in each map: Up to four victims must locate and power a number of generators, find one of two exits, throw the switch, and escape. The killer needs to stop them.

In order to survive, victims need to get past one of three different disfigured murderers. Each has different special abilities, like setting bear traps or ringing a bell to become invisible. From the moment the match starts as a survivor, you need to think and act quickly. Determining which killer you are up against is crucial, but you also need to find generators and repair them as soon as you can.

The different variables and bloody action keep you on your toes, regardless of which side you're on. Both roles offer up thrills; I audibly yelped when a killer snuck up on me as a victim, and cackled in a deranged fashion when chasing a helpless teenager through the woods.

Developer Behaviour has created jump scares in a multiplayer game that largely has the same pacing and identical objectives every time you play. Despite the same loop of finding and repairing generators while staying hidden, each match is filled with tension and terror. Procedurally generated elements fill creepy cornfields, decrepit homesteads, and rusting junkyards.

Once the killer starts picking off your allies, you have a hard time completing your objectives. When the supernatural murderer hangs your friends on hooks to be sacrificed, you need to make a tough call. Do you risk saving them, knowing that the killer is probably keeping a close eye on his prey? Or do you take the time he wastes camping to find and repair a generator in relative safety?

As the killer, you need to move fast. While you can dominate the survivors with ease, they are faster and have the advantage of third-person view (as opposed to the killer's first-person perspective). It's easy to lose them, which makes each chase thrilling. More than once, my game came down to one final victim in an exciting cat-and-mouse conclusion.

As a survivor, giving away your position is easy. Running leaves a trail for the killer to follow, and failing a skill check QTE while repairing a generator signals the pursuer audibly and visually. Walking, crouching, and even hiding in the tall grass are often the best choices. This creates strategy in movement, and creates important choices from moment to moment. It's easy (and dangerous) to simply run away. However, if you want to get back to a generator you had to vacate, you're better off moving slowly and quietly, hiding until the killer moves on.

Dead by Daylight rarely feels one-sided, and I enjoy that many matches come down to the wire. One side can potentially dominate early, but those instances are a welcome exception, hinting more at impressive skill than imbalance.

Many of your Dead by Daylight games are likely to be with random players, which feels foreign in a world that has only increased emphasis on playing with friends in recent years. Once in the game, you're cut off from communicating. This works, but I'd much prefer a proximity-based voice system, which the killer would be able to hear, too. Completely eliminating a way to chat seems counter-intuitive. This means that you want to take advantage of the pre-match chat to strategize, especially since you won't know what killer will be hunting you.

You can't group up with friends for ranked play. However, you can play private matches with friends. Since you can play with two to four victims (with generator repair requirements scaling to player count), it's a good solution. As the killer, you wait a bit longer for matchmaking. However, I rarely had a problem finding a team of victims to hunt. Because Behaviour allows players to choose which experience they want, you never get stuck playing the side you don't want to.

Playing with friends is a hurdle right now, but largely because I want to share these tense moments with people I know. Regardless, I keep feeling the pull back to Dead by Daylight. The seeds of greatness are here, but with plenty of room for refinement and clarity to improve the experience. » Mike Futter

Grand Kingdom

A new kind of strategy domination

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** NIS America **Developer** Monochrome Corp., Spike Chunsoft **Release** June 21 **Rating** T

8

PS4 • Vita

» **Concept**
Assemble a group of mercenaries on a continent at the brink of downfall, choosing a nation within it to support and shape its future

» **Graphics**
Gorgeous art stands out against the vibrant backdrops. Too bad the environments lack detail

» **Sound**
The music is decent, but you hear the same tracks repeatedly. The voice acting is mercifully sparse

» **Playability**
Controls and mechanics are easy to figure out after a few battles, but the stick sensitivity can result in unintended moves

» **Entertainment**
Grand Kingdom offers plenty of fun and tense tactical battles, giving you a slew of customization options and online competition

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The strategy/RPG genre has seen its share of growing pains in this modern age, and plenty of games have tried to shake things up, such as Fire Emblem's relationship system and The Banner Saga's choice-driven narrative. Grand Kingdom is paving its own way, ditching grid-based combat, offering a bevy of customization, and putting more action into the gameplay. It does a wonderful job, and I enjoyed the challenging battles, building up my party, and competing online.

The game has a single-player campaign that serves as your introduction to the title and all its intricacies. The plot is basic, mainly about how the continent of Resonail, which is made up of four nations, has erupted into war. The lure to Grand Kingdom isn't its story, however, it's the gameplay and party-building, and the campaign delivers on those fronts, giving you fun missions and battles.

In Grand Kingdom, you put together a team of four mercenaries with classes of your choosing. Every time you step into a mission or quest, it's set up like a board game, where you move your piece around the field. This can trigger battles or random events, but treasure and resources are also planted across the field. The board is littered with obstacles, and depending on your party selection, certain field skills can help you get around them. For instance, I had a wind skill that could take away any bad weather instantly, which normally would take three turns to clear up.

In combat, you have three lanes where your party and enemies can be moved. Character placement can mean life or death; you usually want your tanks up front and your ranged members in the back, but you also have to make decisions in the heat of battle, such as getting them out of the way if they're vulnerable to a canon or a charged attack. You can see the turn order and what's incoming to help you strategize. Deciding which enemies to attack first can be make or break. Do you want to focus on deadly mages right in your vicinity or are you better off eliminating the leader to lower the opponent's movement and action gauge?

Encounters are a cross between turn-based and action gameplay, forming one of my favorite strategy/RPG battle systems of recent years.

Every character has an action gauge for movement and attacks. For melee characters, you want to repeatedly press the corresponding button to combo up attacks when near enemies. For ranged characters, it's all about timing and hitting the attack button as a meter displays on the enemy. In both cases, characters can knock opponents in the air or hit them into objects (or even each other) for more damage. Battles have surprising variety in how they play out, and there's nothing like lining up an attack and having it kill multiple enemies as they fly into each other. But also beware of your own characters' positions, because they can take friendly damage. Sometimes it might mean letting a party member get severely wounded for the greater good.

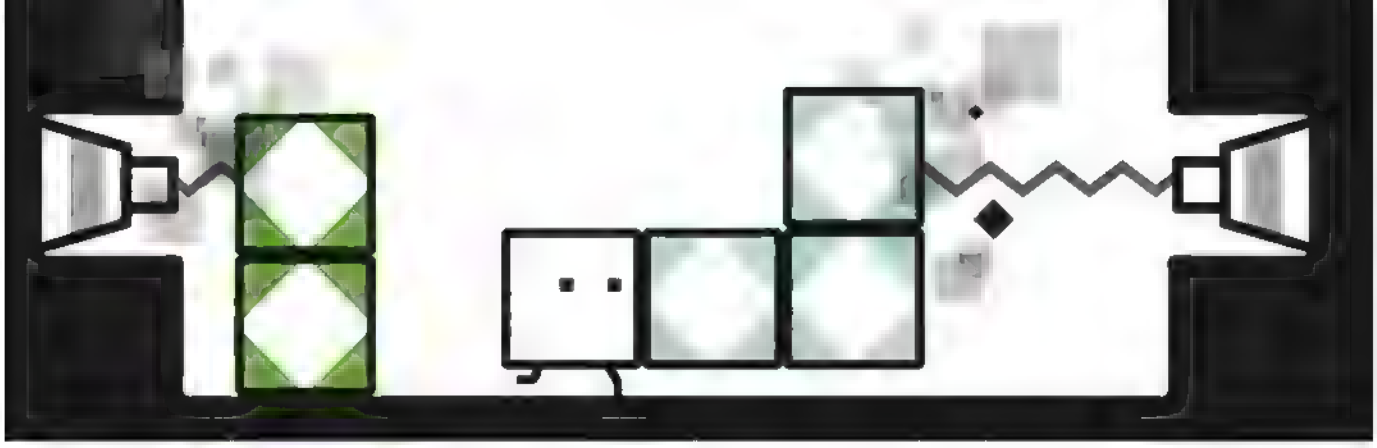
Outside of taking on missions, some of the most fun I had was building up my party with the breadth of customization the game offers. The class variety is diverse, featuring everything from a dragon mage to an arcanist, and you choose their skills, allocating experience points, and equipping them with gear you can buy or create.

While the battle system thrives, the backdrops, especially in combat, do nothing to help it. I noticed the scenery was similar in every encounter, making them lack excitement. Maps can also take a while to complete, and in the campaign you sometimes have three boss battles in succession. Dying at the end of the map can mean losing a lot of progress.

The experience also gets repetitive in other ways. In and outside of the campaign, you're grinding to improve your party at every turn, though you do have different types of quests to negate some of the tedium. Your level carries over when you take your party online, where you form a contract with one of the four nations vying for domination. Wars play out daily, and you can choose to manually control your troops or let the A.I. control your party, giving you a chance to earn experience and see new strategies in a competitive space. Unfortunately, my engagement drastically declined after a few days of playing faithfully. Even if the conditions are slightly different, you're still doing the same thing: battles on repeat and roaming similar maps.

Grand Kingdom is a solid strategy/RPG, especially if you've been hankering for something new and different. The game is entertaining, and strategy fans should appreciate all the decisions it puts in their hands.

– Kimberley Wallace



Boxboxboy

A successful stack

8

3DS

» Concept
Continue Qbby's adventures by letting him produce a second set of boxes for a slightly different approach to puzzle solving

» Graphics
Retains the clean, black and white visuals of the original. It's attractive, but also indistinguishable from the first game

» Sound
Much like the visuals, the soundtrack is the same (often literally) as the first game's, and is still charming in its simplicity

» Playability
Qbby controls well, easily clearing platforming gaps and producing boxes for solving puzzles

» Entertainment
This follow-up builds on the well-designed original, and does so without overcomplicating the mechanics

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** HAL Laboratory **Release** June 30 **Rating** E

The original Boxboy from HAL Laboratory was a left-field 3DS eShop surprise. It felt like a successful indie experiment, but from a developer that knows how to make huge (and hugely successful) games like Super Smash Bros. and Kirby. Despite its critical success, the announcement of a sequel was surprising, as the original felt like a one-off that nailed exactly what it was going for without the need for a follow-up. The sequel proves that notion, but also confirms that more Boxboy is not a bad thing.

In the Boxboy games, players control Qbby, a box with eyes and legs that magically produces a collection of interconnected boxes from his body. He can use those boxes to create platforms, press switches, or use them like a rope to climb to higher points or through small gaps. The big twist for Boxboxboy is a small one: Now Qbby can produce two sets of separate boxes as opposed to just one. This creates new and interesting puzzle twists that allow Qbby to create taller platforms, hit multiple switches at once, and build box structures on top of box structures.

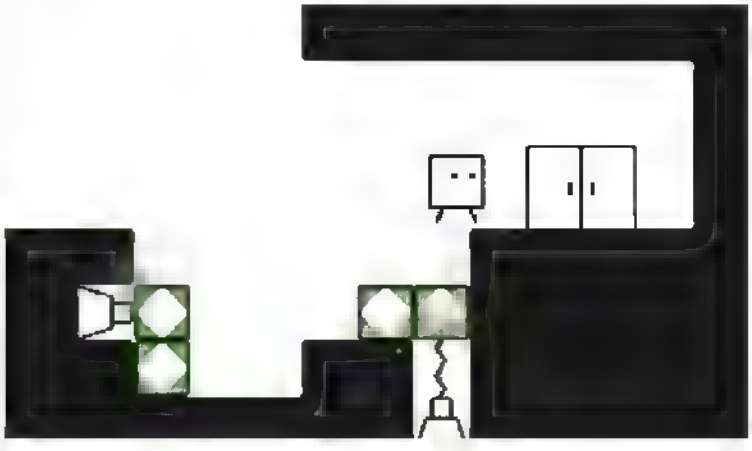
Despite the potential to get overcomplicated with multiple sets of boxes, Boxboxboy does a good job keeping everything simple without veering into the realm of absurdly obtuse solutions. I solved puzzles with thoughtful consideration as opposed to blind experimentation. It made me feel smart with frequent epiphanies, rarely relying on the same solutions for similar puzzles.

Finding bonus crowns in each level adds an additional challenge. They are placed in hard-to-reach (but visible) places, and obtaining them depends on your ability to use as few boxes as possible, since using too many causes the crowns to disappear. I prefer this sort of challenge to a timed one, but I rarely got a sense of accomplishment from figuring out how to get a crown; I usually restarted the level after determining the solution to avoid wasting boxes. It makes the limit on boxes arbitrary, and I would have liked to figure out how to get the crowns and move on through the level without restarting. It makes going for the best score feel like less of an achievement.

The trickier puzzle mechanics surface after the credits roll, which is great. Beating the game is a breezy and fun puzzle experience, but I like that a worthwhile challenge waits after the credits for those who want it. The extra levels add all kinds of new mechanics and ideas not found in the main game like sticky walls and movable boxes already in the level, so you aren't just tackling harder versions of puzzles you have already solved.

For fans of the original Boxboy, an unavoidable sense of déjà vu permeates Boxboxboy. It doesn't look, sound, play, or feel different. You can even use all the costumes unlocked in the first game (and their inherent bonuses) in the sequel as long as your save file from the first game is present. In this way, Boxboxboy feels more like an extension than a full sequel. Despite this, the puzzles are still well-designed, and its charm has moved forward completely intact. About the only thing that feels truly new are a series of unlockable comics that poke fun at the strange mechanics and break the fourth wall. It lends a sense of humor, whereas the first game seemed like it was trying really hard to say something profound, but never quite figured out what that was.

Boxboxboy may be remarkably similar to the original Boxboy, stripping it of its experimental indie cred and slipping it into a comfortable and safe sequel. You get more of what made the original Boxboy worth a recommendation, and the same can be said of this follow-up. **» Kyle Hilliard**



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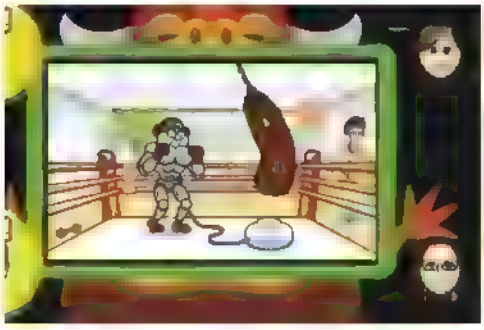


Rhythm Heaven Megamix

Nintendo's strange musical adventure improves

8.5

gamefarmer SILVER

Style 1 to 4–Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** June 15 **Rating** E

3DS

» Concept
Megamix takes the best rhythm minigames of past entries, adds new games and a story, and improves on past shortcomings

» Graphics
The recognizable and zany style demands a smile and lifts your spirits

» Sound
I enjoyed every song. Even the training and menus offer catchy music that won't soon leave your head

» Playability
Most activities only require a single button press and the ability to keep up with the beat

» Entertainment
The story doesn't add much, but the music-based gameplay is stronger than ever thanks to better indicators of your timing

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Rhythm Heaven is a series that marches to the beat of its own drum. Megamix is undeniably a rhythm/music game, but with its simple mechanics, challenge, and absurd sense of humor, it stands apart from others in the genre by embracing interactive music in a different way. The core gameplay moves forward from the previous entries, but Megamix is the best in the series so far thanks to substantial improvements and a greatest-hits attitude toward its collection of minigames.

Rhythm Heaven's minigames are simpler and more diverse than the pattern-replicating gameplay of titles like Guitar Hero and Rock Band. They typically use a single input and ask players to tap along with the beat or press a button when prompted. Rhythm Heaven gives you a fantastic handle on the music you're playing, and it's easy to listen, play, and appreciate the tunes. You can play most of the minigames without even looking at the screen thanks to well-implemented sound cues, which makes you feel genuinely involved in the music.

Megamix gives feedback on your progress both during and after each minigame. In past entries, you only received a rating at the end of a song. In Megamix you get a numerical score at the end, but an indicator on the lower screen lets you know if you've hit the beat perfectly, too early, too late, or missed entirely during the minigames. The games are still challenging, but this time around I had a much better handle on what I was doing right and wrong, which led to fewer retries.

The package includes more than 70 rhythm minigames, some new, some old, and some pulled from the first Rhythm Heaven that only released in Japan. The minigames are short and fun to replay, tasking you with a huge assortment of strange premises all set to infectious beats. Sometimes you are a sad bear eating donuts and cake. Sometimes you're a wrestler responding to interview questions. Sometimes cats dancing like snakes in the woods want you to chop firewood. The new minigames are all excellent additions, and revisiting the old ones doesn't feel like a retread thanks to small twists and their inherent replayability. The collection has been well-curated and only the best made the cut. I only played one or two minigames I was happy to leave behind after completing.

Remixes combine many minigames into one infectious music compilation. They don't show up until about halfway through the game, but are worth the wait. The final few especially stand out as surprise and challenge-filled odes to what makes Rhythm Heaven such a crazy and fun series. Usually, the Remixes set expectations by letting you know which minigames will appear before starting (like karate-chopping flower pots, or pulling chin hair off of onions), but the final songs throw curveballs at you with unexpected games, and it's exciting and challenging.

The inclusion of a story is confusing, but it doesn't bring down the full experience. The tale explicitly indicates that you should not take it seriously, and doesn't add any context to the myriad disconnected minigames. Here's the premise: You follow Tibby, who has fallen from Heaven World, and you need to play rhythm minigames to get him back home. The story introduces some humorous characters, but overall it stands as a barrier you must click through to get back to the music. Rhythm Heaven has never been short on personality, and the story feels like an unnecessary attempt to inject more. It has a few laughs, but mostly I just got annoyed with it, especially after its multiple false endings.

Up to four players can participate in local cooperative games, but the mode is limited. In it, players just play the same minigames simultaneously and it tallies up individual and cumulative scores – and that's it. Fever's multiplayer allowed players to trade rhythms back and forth and do other interesting cooperative and competitive musical games on the same television screen. It was a mode worth exploring on the Wii, but here you won't miss out on much if you can't find others to play with.

Megamix functions as both a great entry-point for newcomers thanks to its excellent minigame collection and the help it provides for breaking down the beats. For veterans, it's like your favorite band released a greatest hits and remixes collection, and threw in a bunch of new worthwhile songs, making Megamix the best and most complete Rhythm Heaven to date.

» Kyle Hilliard

Monster Hunter Generations

Tiny tweaks and massive beasts

gamerfornia SILVER gamerfornia GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Capcom
Developer Capcom Release July 15 Rating T

8.75

You're out of potions, your weapon is worn down to a blunted toothpick, and poison is ticking at your depleted health. You attempt a last-ditch effort, running up the snowy mountaintop and diving into the massive mammoth with a smashing combination assault that you finish off with a flourish, changing into a powerful hunter-art skill with enough power to slay the beast and finish the quest. The prolonged encounter taxed you and your abilities, but the defiant, exhilarating victory is made even sweeter by harvesting the monster for resources. The next fight will be that much easier as you upgrade your arsenal with shells, bones, and claws.

Big battles are the essence of Monster Hunter Generations, a thriving loop of material acquisition, weapon enhancement and customization, and thrilling boss encounters. Sticking with the systems until you learn the delicate balance between timing and attack, and exploring combos (even using the new hunter arts to cap off or begin a combo) is rewarding. Players who don't give up during their first bouts with challenging monsters will enjoy an addictive cycle of exploration and customization, with new weapons, new armor, and new zones to explore.

Those familiar with the Monster Hunter franchise will feel right at home in Generations, which adds a bevy of new options and tweaks to traditional elements. Players select from 14 main weapons, choose a hunter style and can master various hunter arts – special moves that need to be charged up before execution in battle. Along with a more robust Palico companion system and a ton of nostalgia-laden villages and environments to explore, these new options make this one of the most content-rich offerings in the entire franchise. The additions don't substantially change the gameplay, but they are especially compelling for veteran players that want to show off their skills with some of the incredibly precise hunter styles.

When you become skilled with one weapon type, you have plenty of different ways to play with it, with styles and arts that facilitate beginners and masters. The difference between how weapons work is immense; it isn't a simple "a sword is faster than a hammer" distinction. Each weapon has a signature playstyle that features different abilities, related support items, and techniques. This adds a lot to the longevity of the game, especially if you've played previous titles with one or two weapons and want experience something new.

The Palico system is the best it has ever been, giving the solo hunter more competent and more customizable companions than previous entries. For those who enjoy hunting in a group online, that gameplay remains one of the strongest hooks in the series, as nothing beats joining up with friends or random players and taking a behemoth to task as a unified (or chaotic, depending on the group) force.

While Monster Hunter can be distilled down into a basic loop of hunt, gather, upgrade, micromanage inventory and Palico perks, rinse and repeat, the process is quite satisfying as the "boss barrage" continues to serve up interesting encounters across snowfields, volcanos, and lush islands. Monster Hunter Generations offers some minor new tweaks to the franchise, but keeps the core completely intact, an easy winner for series veterans and the best point of entry for a new player looking to cut their teeth on some challenging creatures. » Daniel Tack

Concept
Challenge a massive roster of giant boss monsters in a variety of environments while upgrading your weapons, armor, and skills

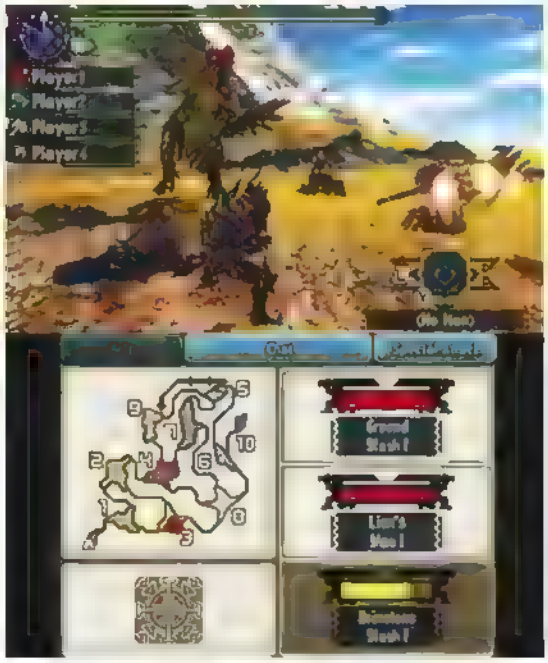
Graphics
The environments and monsters look impressive for a handheld game

Sound
Roars, slams, and slashes compliment a raucous soundtrack that keeps the tension high

Playability
Tons of mechanics and the precise timing of combat can be intimidating to newcomers, but Generations is the easiest Monster Hunter title to ease into

Entertainment
Hundreds of hours of entertainment with a compelling hunting and upgrading loop

Replay Value
High



PLAYSTATION 4

Alienation	7.75	Jul-16
Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist Of The Mysterious Book	8	Jul-16
Battleborn	6	Jul-16
Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
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Day of the Tentacle Remastered	8.25	Jun-16
Dirt Rally	8.5	May-16
Division, The	8	May-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
Enter the Gungeon	8.5	Jun-16
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Firewatch	7.75	Apr-16
Hitman: Episode 1	6	May-16
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Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
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XBOX ONE

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Walking Dead: Michonne Episode 3 What We Deserve, The	8	Jul-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine	9.25	Jul-16

6 Fun

Platform PS4, PC **Release** July 5 **Rating** M

Like a digital pied piper, Fun brought a steady stream of intrigued coworkers to my desk to watch over my shoulder while I played. Once they got a sense of the gameplay, however, they didn't stick around long. While Fun has some substance behind its style, the unforgiving difficulty takes its toll. – Jeff Marchiafava

8 VA-11 HALL-A

Platform PC **Release** June 21 **Rating** NR

Even though you may have to wince through a few conversations, VA-11 HALL-A sells its cyberpunk atmosphere with great presentation, including an exceptional soundtrack and cool character art. The text may be enough to convey the plot, but the way it works together with the sound and visuals makes the atmosphere immersive. – Joe Juba

4 Ghostbusters

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** July 12 **Rating** E10+

The tedium of playing through the same encounters over and over again makes Ghostbusters impossible to recommend. The awful one-liners, the poor sound design, and the boring story would be tolerable if it was fun to play, but it's not. – Brian Shea

PLAYSTATION 3

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Minecraft: Story Mode, Episode 5 – Order Up	7	Jun-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
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VITA

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The Nintendo Games That Nintendo Didn't Make

An account of how a competing console released four Nintendo games from the man who made them

by Kyle Hilliard

In 1991, a company known in the United States predominantly for manufacturing light bulbs entered the cutthroat world of video games with the Philips CD-i. The fledgling console was expected to compete directly with the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo.

The details of how it all came about are vague, but Nintendo partnered with Philips with the intent of making a CD-ROM add-on for the Super Nintendo after an initial partnership with Sony with the same goal went sour. Nintendo signed a contract with Philips that gave the Japanese company rights to all of the CD games that would release for the add-on in exchange for Philips obtaining the rights to use some of Nintendo's characters, specifically those from the Mario and Zelda franchises. The add-on never came to be, but the contract led to Philips releasing one Mario game and three Zelda games on its CD-i console. It was one of the rare occasions where these characters appeared on a non-Nintendo system.

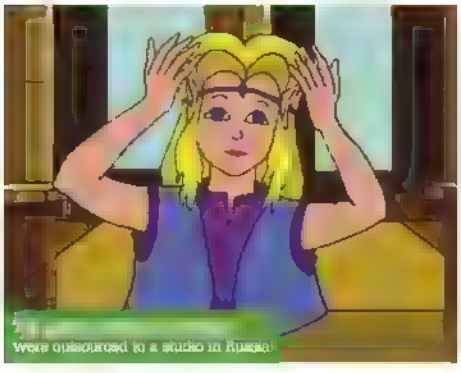
The man behind many of these off-shoot titles is Stephen Radosh. His credits include being executive producer on Hotel Mario, executive in charge of production on both Link: The Faces of Evil and Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon, and production executive on the final Zelda CD-i game, Zelda's Adventure. His strange and varied career in the game industry started with computer chess, moved to Atari's early days, and carried through to Sega and Philips. We spoke with Radosh about what it was like to be one of the only developers to make Nintendo games without its oversight.

From Atari To Donkey Kong

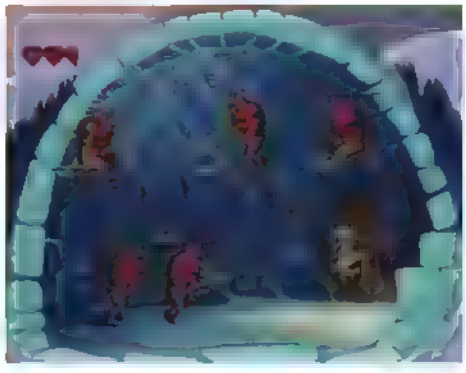
Radosh got his first programming gig with a company that published textbooks, but was also interested in creating entertainment-based computer products. He worked with developers on a chess game called Sargon,

These mark some of the only occasions where you can play as Zelda in a Zelda game.

Development started simultaneously, but Zelda released first, followed by Hotel Mario, and then Link, all within a few months of each other.



Were outsourced to a studio in Russia.



but beelined to Atari when he saw an opening for a manager of design in New York. He worked on a number of Atari games and was present for the release of E.T. and the subsequent collapse. "We got a couple of advanced copies and I put it in," Radosh says. "Within 20 minutes I was calling the west coast going, 'Um, I think you sent us a bad rom here. This game keeps crashing.' They went, 'No, no we sent you the release copy.' I wrote a memo like, 'You can't release this!'"

Radosh left Atari and landed at Sega after pushing off inferior offers from Coleco. Sega was pushing its Master System at the time, but Radosh mostly worked on arcade cabinets, including one that never released, but was Radosh's first experience working on a Nintendo franchise.

"Somehow Sega had gotten the rights to Donkey Kong," Radosh says. He developed an arcade game, for Sega, where players controlled Donkey Kong as a parking attendant. "You were dodging cars that were pulling in and out of the lot, and you had to get X number of cars parked in spaces," Radosh says.

One of the reasons the game never released was because during Radosh's employment with Sega, the company (owned by Paramount at the time) was sold back to Japan, leaving him to explore new job opportunities. He recognized that, despite never working in film or television, he could call himself Stephen Radosh from Paramount, and used that leverage to develop television game shows (*see Catchphrase sidebar*), but couldn't stay away from video games for long.

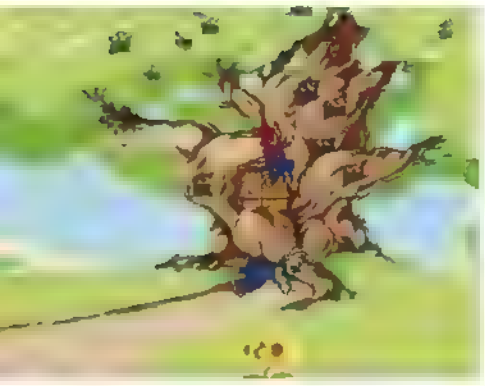
The Unlikely Console Contender

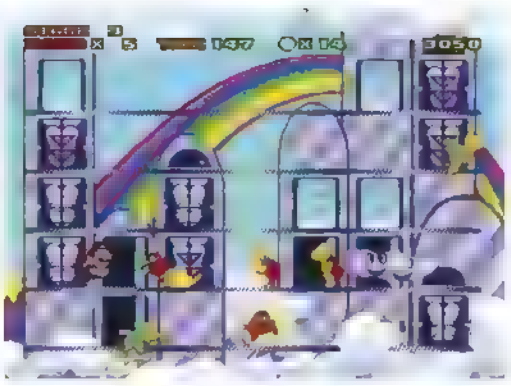
Philips' console aspirations had education in mind, but research showed it would also need entertainment software in order to be successful. Philips sought out Radosh, who was finishing up his stint in the world of TV game shows and was excited by the idea of returning to video games. Philips made him vice president of its entertainment division thanks to his history with Atari and Sega.

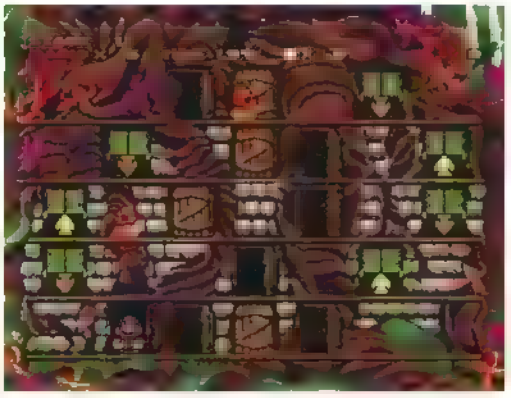
The CD-i console design was more or less complete by the time Radosh joined, giving him little to no opportunity to help direct the vision of the system. "Unfortunately, those wheels

Catchphrase

show, "and I still get royalties. Even better."







had turned," Radosh says. "I started looking into the hardware and the capabilities. I desperately tried right from the beginning to get them to upgrade the hardware."

The CD-i was a video game console that was somehow designed not to play video games. "It was a very static system. It was not designed to move pixels." Despite his attempts, Radosh was stuck working with what they already had.

"[Philips] thought they had something unique. What they didn't realize was... they designed retroactively as opposed to progressively." Radosh says. "Instead of looking at what the next generation of hardware should be, they used the current generation Problem with that is, by the time you come out, you are the last generation, not the current."

The Spoils Of A Legal Loophole

Radosh was not present for the negotiations with Nintendo that lead to Philips being able to use the Mario and Zelda properties. Allowing another company to make games with its beloved characters wasn't a willing choice for Nintendo, but the company was ultimately cooperative. "They could have kept saying no, and then it would have never hit the market," Radosh says. "I was expecting nothing but combative, and I got the exact opposite."

Radosh worked with Nintendo of America directly on the Zelda and Mario projects. "I still had to get approval from Nintendo on everything, because these were their trademark characters." Radosh says, "And any-

one who owns trademark characters will tell you, you don't want Link having sex with Zelda on the ramparts of the castle." He never spoke directly with the Japanese side or received feedback from Mario and Zelda's creator, Shigeru Miyamoto, during development. He is confident, however, that he saw the games. "Yes. I'm pretty sure he would have – everything was still under their control ultimately," Radosh says. "The meetings were short, amicable, fun, lot of laughs."

Hotel Mario is different than traditional Mario games predominantly thanks to its strange, voiced, animated cutscenes. You still view Mario from a 2D perspective, but he doesn't jump his way through a traditional Mario level. Instead, it takes place on a single screen with a handful of platforms with doors on them. The goal of the game is to avoid the goombas and close all the doors. "They loved Hotel Mario – that was the first one that got the greenlight," Radosh says. "Hotel Mario was my design, and it was a game that kills me; I still can't win at my own game."

Creating the Zelda games followed a different process. "We went through a little bit of issues with the look of characters for Link and Zelda," Radosh says. "Because animation at that time was really expensive here, we opted for this hand-drawn look for those games. We wound up with Russian animators. We'd send them vague storyboards and gameplay, and then [Russia] would say, 'What do you think of this for a visual concept?' We would go back and forth, and one or two of the original concepts were negated by Nintendo. Which was fine, because it wasn't like, 'Oh my god we gotta do this! This is perfect!' I've learned never to be precious about anything. It's just an idea. And sometimes other ideas are better than the original ideas."

The three Zelda games share a similar trajectory to Hotel Mario. The first two, Link: The Faces of Evil and Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon, are side-scrolling action games with famously bad animated cutscenes. You can use items and fill out your inventory, but it does not feature puzzles like a traditional Zelda game. Zelda's Adventure, which released about a year after the first two games, used digitized actors and adopted an overhead perspective for gameplay making it look closer to a typical classic Nintendo Zelda game.

Early critical reception for all the Philips guided Nintendo games was divisive, with both positive and negative reviews. Radosh says they sold well for the CD-i's limited audience. "The internet was around, there were bulletin boards – we got really positive responses," Radosh says, "The games sold really well, especially Hotel Mario. Hotel Mario sold for years after the company went out of business."

The subsequent years have not been kind to Hotel Mario or the Zelda titles. The games routinely appear on the bottom of lists counting down the best Mario and Zelda games, and receive prominent placement on lists recounting the worst games.

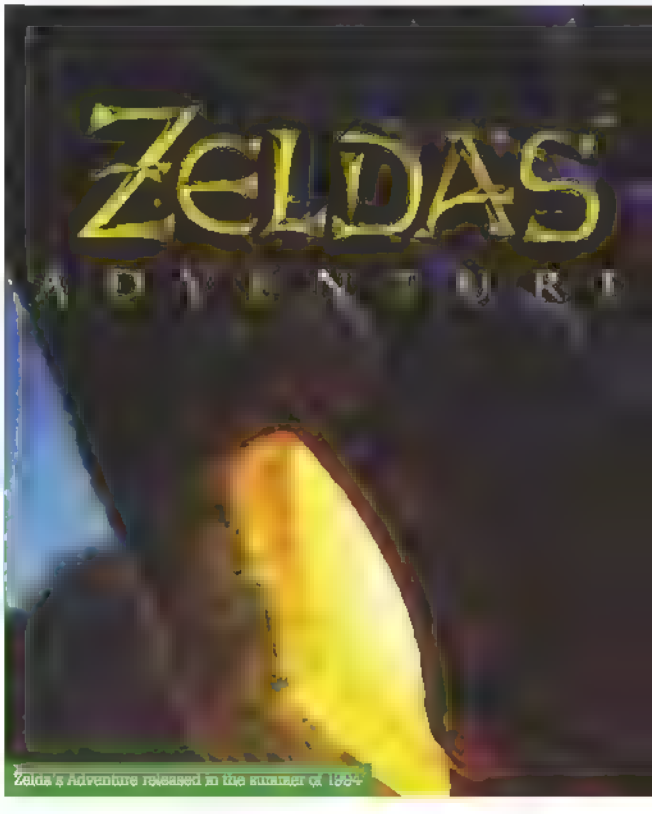
"I'm assuming [Nintendo Japan] saw it," Radosh says. "They continued to be non-problematic, which to me was the indication that they really did like them. Because if they didn't like them, they had every opportunity to throw up as many roadblocks along the way as they wanted to."

Ultimately, the CD-i is considered a commercial failure. It had some notable innovations, like a CD drive when other platforms were still only experimenting with the technology, and a few limited internet options. It also played disc-based movies before the PlayStation 2 fostered widespread DVD adoption. Its $700 price tag, which is still a high price for a gaming console almost 25 years later, a low adoption rate, and mostly subpar software line-up lead to its demise. Philips never experimented with the gaming industry again after its official discontinuation in 1998.

The Square Dancing Playwright

Today, Radosh's professional life is as eclectic as ever. He's the president of his local square dance chapter, writes and directs theatre, runs a repair service for handicapped vehicles, collects royalties from his TV game shows, and keeps up with modern gaming. He is proud of the work he did on his CD-i Nintendo games, despite their reputation. "Every now and then I put them in as just kind of a kick. They're dated, but every generation of gaming systems looks old," Radosh says. "We took a system where people said 'You can't do that' and at least made it do some of that."

Zelda's Adventure used live-action actors instead of pre-rendered animations.



Zelda's Adventure released in the summer of 1994.

Building A Mario And Zelda Bible

this character, this is where she was born, this is what she likes, this is what she

a lot of that for the Link and Zeldas, and even a little bit for Mario." Radosh wanted

We had really nice development curves on all of those games."

The Cryptarch's Challenge

The crypto-archaeologists of the Destiny universe have an opening in their ranks, but only those schooled in history and knowledge can join them. Can you prove your worth to the Cryptarchy?

1. Before Oryx became the Taken King, murdering and enslaving countless creatures to his will, he was:
   A. A sea traveler
   B. A doting father
   C. A little girl
   D. All of the above

2. Who did not have an armor piece or weapon named after them hidden within the Vault of Glass?
   A. Kabr
   B. Nirwen
   C. Praedyth
   D. Atheon

3. Warlocks hoping to take full advantage of the Nothing Manacles would be wise to equip the _____.
   A. Scatter grenade
   B. Axion Bolt grenade
   C. Vortex grenade
   D. Firebolt grenade

4. Guardians who slew an unwed Hive wizard were on a quest for which mighty but dark weapon?
   A. Invective
   B. Bad Juju
   C. Thorn
   D. Pocket Infinity

5. Who faced off in the showdown at Dwindler's Ridge?
   A. Cayde-6 and Andal Brask
   B. Dredgen Yor and Shin Malphur
   C. Osiris and Toland
   D. Shaxx and Zavala

6. Which item is not likely to result in greater glimmer acquisition?
   A. Black Wax Idol
   B. Blue Polyphage
   C. Ether Seeds
   D. Hadronic Essence

7. Who commanded the Ares One mission that first encountered the Traveler?
   A. Jacob Hardy
   B. Jaren Ward
   C. Maya Sundaresh
   D. Clovis Bray

8. You are shown a schematic for The Fangs of Nyx. What is it?
   A. A weapon
   B. A sparrow
   C. A jumpship
   D. A relic of the Golden Age

9. Name the Vex combatant.
   A. Wizard
   B. Interceptor
   C. Archon
   D. Hydra

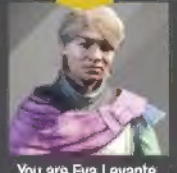
10. A young Titan seeks your advice, as she attempts to advance her melee capabilities. What would you tell her?
    A. Make a point to punch Cabal Phalanx shields to increase the power of your gauntlets
    B. Don the Achilles shader, which increases melee speed
    C. Equip gear that enhances your strength, even at the expense of your discipline
    D. Give her Super Good Advice

SCORE

0-1

You are Kadi 55-30. Best stick to the mail room.

2-3

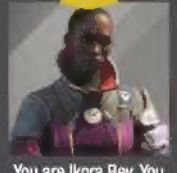


You are Eva Levante. You never know quite what to say. Pull yourself together.

4-5

You are Variks. A long memory, yesss?

6-7



You are Ikora Rey. You are wise, but better suited to the Vanguard.

8-9

You are Master Ives. Learned, but not as above everyone else as you think.

10

You are Master Rahool. A million deaths are not enough for you.

ANSWERS: 1D 2B 3A 4C 5B 6D 7A 8C 9D 10C

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